



THE CASE FILES
OF
JEWELER
RICHARD

WRITTEN BY
NANAKO
TSUJIMURA

6
NOVEL

ILLUSTRATED BY
UTAKO
YUKIHIRO



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Seven Seas Entertainment

HOSEKISHO RICHARD-SHI NO NAZOKANTEI

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Illustration by Utako Yukihiro

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CAST

Seigi Nakata

A dedicated college student hoping to go into civil service after graduation, he has started working part-time for Richard. Just as his name—Seigi, meaning “justice”—implies, he’s an earnest young man always looking to help others, even if he may be a bit lacking in tact at times.



Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian

An Englishman from Sri Lanka who speaks Japanese more fluently than your average Japanese national and is an accomplished jeweler. While his precise age remains a mystery, his incredible beauty would strike anyone, regardless of gender, utterly speechless.



c a s e

EXTRA

Sinhalite
Beckons



EVERYTHING IN LIFE is once in a lifetime. You never live the same moment twice.

Even if it never particularly bothered you before, experiencing something extraordinary could leave you painfully aware of how little you'd been doing to try to enrich your life. Traveling, for instance, often made you think about how you'd never see that place again. Yes, you were never in exactly the same situation twice...but for some reason, it made my heart grow heavy with unease whenever such thoughts came to the forefront of my mind. Especially in times like these.

The jewelry shop I had encountered during my trip was closed. Its owner was nowhere to be found, and neither were any of its employees.

A stray dog was stretched out in the middle of the empty street, taking a nap.

This was Sri Lanka—a small country close to India, famous for its tea and its gemstones. I asked the nearby shop owners if they knew where the owner of the jewelry shop had gone, but they weren't very forthcoming. I was pretty confident in my English, but maybe they couldn't understand me. The only Sinhala I knew was the word for hello: āyubūvan. The owner of the barbershop next door just shrugged at this strange Asian woman.

“.....”

The little jewelry shop I'd found was tucked away in a corner of the city of Kandy. Gems of various colors sparkled in the shop window. The spread favored a wide variety of small, loose gems, rather than big, expensive-looking pieces with large stones, which made it feel less intimidating.

I wasn't an expert on gemstones, but I did enjoy looking at pretty gems, and I could usually figure out their names from their colors. The display was divided into three levels. Its contents, from top to bottom, were aquamarine, peridot, and what appeared to be the rather unusual stone known as sinhalite—a soft brown stone named after Sri Lanka. The stone looked flawless to the naked eye. It must have been rather high quality.

I wanted an unusual stone to commemorate my trip. Wanted it passionately,

for reasons I won't get into here.

But my stay in this mountain town would be ending today. At 3 p.m, I'd be getting on a bus to a town near the airport. And then tomorrow, I'd be going home to Japan. It was already midday. First thing this morning, I had made a pilgrimage to a temple that was said to host one of the Buddha's teeth, bought some spices at the gift shop, and just happened across this jewelry shop while wandering around. It felt like fate...but the owner wasn't in.

I was used to anticlimactic endings to once-in-a-lifetime chances like this, which was kind of sad in and of itself. If I hung around the area a little longer, I could wait for the shop owner to return. Of course, there was no guarantee he'd be back even if I did wait. The people of this country lived their lives in a really laid-back way. I was glad there were hardly any beggar children around, like there were in India, but it felt a little dangerous for a woman to be waiting alone on the street all the same.

As I waffled about what to do under the blazing sun—

“Is something the matter?”

The words I heard from behind me were in a crisp, clear British accent. I was surprised. Most of the people in this country spoke heavily accented English. But his voice was graceful, like a beautiful song.

When I turned around, I found a young man standing behind me. Shameful as it was, I must admit that I stared for a moment.

“I apologize for startling you, but you seemed troubled.”

What should I even call what I was feeling? Love at first sight? I don't think that was quite it. I was into blond beefcakes, and this guy was more on the lithe side. Not to mention that I had no desire to date him. He had this air of perfection that made me feel like I could stare at him for ages. And he was extremely handsome. I felt that very strongly. But, like really, he was extremely handsome.

“Um...do people often comment on how handsome you are?”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

That was the last thing I meant to ask him. He might well work at one of the shops in the area. I tried asking him if he was familiar with the jeweler who ran the shop in question and mentioned that I was interested in purchasing one of the shop’s stones. He looked a little troubled for a moment, then asked me which of the stones I was interested in.

I couldn’t believe he really worked there...but I needed to be cautious. Kind and handsome men taking advantage of female tourists to swindle them out of all their money was the oldest fraud in the book. I’d be at a disadvantage negotiating if he knew which one I wanted most.

“Um...I’d like to take a closer look at that aquamarine on the top row.”

He blinked a few times before lowering his beautiful eyelids. He hesitated for a few seconds, then apologized in an elegant voice.

“That is actually blue topaz, not aquamarine.”

“Huh?”

There was no way. All the blue topaz I’d ever seen was more of a fluorescent blue, not this muted, pale color. I objected to that effect in English, but he continued, sounding uneasy.

“I believe it may have been treated in an attempt to elicit that reaction. Many visitors to Sri Lanka have at least some knowledge of gemstones. I don’t particularly approve of the practice, but—”

“...So you don’t work at this shop?”

“Indeed, I do not,” the man said with an awkward smile. I was in awe of how perfectly handsome he looked, no matter the expression on his face. I pointed at one of the gems on the middle row and asked him about it, saying I thought it was a peridot.

“No, I believe that is green zircon.”

“R-really? Are you serious? It’s not peridot...”

“I don’t mean to sound tactless, but peridot isn’t produced in Sri Lanka.”

“Goodness. Then...even this sinhalite is fake?”

“Smoky quartz,” he announced in a detached tone.

Quartz? I was at an utter loss for words. The dog sleeping nearby yawned and got up, seemingly tired of our conversation, then walked across the street, plopped down, and resumed its nap.

So the three hours I’d spent waiting outside the shop had been a waste. Learning that was at least *something*, I guess. But where to go next?

I thanked the man, with a certain ferocity in my eyes, and was motioning to leave when he seemed like he was about to stop me. Then he hesitated. I wondered what it was. Maybe he was going to try to hit on me? I was in a good mood, having cleared up my current predicament, and felt confident that my American-made mace would keep me safe if he tried some kind of pushy con-man act. That said, I was also open to romantic overtures.

But that wasn’t exactly the vibe I got.

“What is it?”

“...I believe I may be able to make you an offer that you would find to your benefit. But I worry that you might assume it’s an attempt to defraud you, given the context.”

He was almost too honest. He forced an awkward smile when I burst out laughing. There was a certain cherubic innocence in his eyes. Could he be any lovelier? I felt like just being in his presence was a win.

“Let me guess: You’re a jeweler yourself?”

“Indeed I am. Although I imagine a rather large proportion of the people who live here might be able to make that claim, seeing as dealing in jewels is a very common side business.”

“Can you show me some aquamarine or peridot right now?”

“Not right this instant,” he said, explaining that his “place of business” was about thirty minutes away. I asked if it was a shop, and he said it was not. Suspicious. But if he really was a con man, he’d definitely have claimed it was a shop, right?

He said I could see all the gems I wanted there. Upon closer inspection, behind him sat one of those canopied scooters that I'd seen a million times since arriving in Sri Lanka. They called them "three-wheelers"—scooters with a canopy and three wheels. I hadn't heard the engine, so he must have been walking it along.

If the place was only thirty minutes away, it couldn't be that far. Should he try to spirit me off somewhere, I could probably jump from the bike without sustaining serious injuries.

"All right, take me there," I said right away.

He seemed surprised, asking me if I was sure. He was probably taken aback by how vulnerable I was making myself, despite being a woman traveling alone. My family was always telling me I was too bold, so it wasn't like I didn't know what I was doing. Two weeks was a decently long trip, but my only luggage was a single backpack. Attracting thieves by walking around with a designer bag or an expensive camera wasn't my style. Of course, I'd had my fair share of awful experiences despite all my precautionary measures, but that was neither here nor there.

When I realized I'd made him feel bad, I told him that as a rule, I trust people. Nice and simple. I wasn't going to go along with someone if I wasn't okay with the possibility of them deceiving me.

"...Am I to take that to mean that you trust me?"

"About 70 percent. I mean, you don't often see con men being so straight with their targets, do you?"

He seemed a little dazed for a moment. He was well dressed, too. It made me wonder if people in Sri Lanka had something against T-shirts. You saw a lot of people dressed in collared shirts, just as he was, even when it was hot out. It *did* look good on him.

He said, "Very well," with a nod and offered me the back seat of his scooter. I sat down immediately, then wrapped my arms around the waist of my timid yet handsome driver, and the scooter quietly took off. He must have taken good care of it, because the engine wasn't making that awful sputtering noise. We slipped out of the city streets and drove down a road running along a lake,

heading into the suburbs.

“Um! Do people often tell you that you’re handsome?”

“Huh?”

“You’re very attractive!”

“I get that sometimes.”

“Really? Only sometimes?”

I peppered him with questions, and he seemed to squirm a bit. I could hear him better when he let off the throttle a little.

“...With all due respect, I’m not terribly comfortable receiving compliments about my appearance.”

“Oh, sorry.”

It wasn’t hard to imagine why someone positively dripping in sex appeal might feel that way. Did he really encounter a lot of other people as lacking in self-restraint as me, though?

I apologized, and he said it was no trouble. How humble.

“That said, I do have this acquaintance,” he prefaced, before telling me a rather curious story. “He had to regularly deal with a person who lavished praise upon anyone with whom they were remotely familiar, all in the pursuit of cementing their own position. They used transparently honeyed words to get whatever they wanted, no matter how unreasonable. I think there’s an element of personal morality involved.”

Honeyed words—it sounded like a line from a historical drama. Like someone who could literally kill with a compliment.

The man went on to say that his acquaintance found this quite painful to deal with. It was hard to imagine that this “acquaintance” was anyone other than himself. He wouldn’t be speaking so naturally about the experience, otherwise. There was something lonely about him as he spoke, maybe because I could only see his back.

“That does sound awful. So, is this ‘acquaintance’ of yours in a better place

now?”

He fell silent for a bit, maybe just because we had come to a three-way intersection. After checking both directions for trucks, he started along the road up the mountain and resumed talking.

“Now that is an excellent question. What is a ‘better place’? Well...I would be lying if I said it wasn’t still painful, but you might say things have been adequately resolved.”

His words were accompanied by what sounded like a faint chuckle.

We continued riding the scooter, with the gentle sound of its exhaust in the background.

c a s e

1

The Wandering
Conch Pearl



I FELT LIKE I'D just had a weird dream.

Richard had been riding a scooter with someone. They were heading somewhere, to see somebody, in a place that looked like it had a warm climate. What was that all about?

I was trying to figure it out when I looked at my lock screen and nearly jumped out of bed. It was 10 a.m. I'd overslept by a whole hour. It was Saturday, too, meaning I wasn't going to make it to *Étranger* in time for work. I must've forgotten to set my alarm.

I felt like death as I showered and got myself dressed before leaving Richard a message, saying that there was no way I could possibly make it on time and that I was very, very sorry. On the bright side, at least I'd bought the milk—*Étranger's* lifeline—yesterday.

I made sure the safe was locked before I rushed out of the apartment. This had become something of a daily habit. My self-assessment had been going so miserably that I'd taken the white sapphire out last night to look at it. It was a stone with a complex history—and it had made its way from Richard's family home to my hands through an equally complex series of events—but there was just something about its perfectly clear, finely sculpted form that had a strange power to put my heart at ease.

The combination lock was properly set. Thank you, past Seigi.

I listened to the very generous message on my voicemail—"Understood. Take your time getting in."—as I swayed on the Tozai Line and transferred to the Marunouchi Line at Ootemachi. I didn't have time to browse the confectionary shops in the underground mall. Normally, I took the Yamanote Line to Shimbashi Station and walked to the shop from there, but the subway route was much faster when I was in a massive hurry. When I arrived in Ginza, I headed for Chuo-doori from the underground mall and made my way to the shop on Nanachome. It was nearly eleven o'clock, right when the shop opened. I felt bad that I hadn't been there to help prepare it for opening. If the royal milk tea had already been brewed, the milk I carried would have lost its purpose, too. Maybe I'd just have to make some milk agar jelly again. I could add some canned tangerines and condensed milk—

I caught my breath as these thoughts ran through my head, then took off as fast as I could walk.

There was an unfamiliar figure standing before the building in which Étranger occupied the second floor. It was a man in a navy-blue suit. If he had business with the management company on the first floor, you'd think he would have gone right in, but he was just loitering in front of the stairs to the second floor. Maybe he had plans to visit Étranger?

"Good morning, um, did you need something from our shop?"

I told him that we opened at eleven, and the man in the suit turned around. He was young. Maybe late twenties. His hair was slicked back stylishly with some light wax, and his face was pale. The way he slouched made his neck look longer.

Instead of answering my original question, the man asked me one of his own. "Are you from the jewelry shop on the second floor?"

"Um, yeah. I am, technically," I said hesitantly.

He looked a little confused. Admittedly, I didn't really *look* like someone who worked at a jewelry shop. Then he stared right at me. It was almost scary.

"Are you an acquaintance of someone by the name of Hamada? Or connected somehow?"

"Um, who?"

"...Pardon me."

The man gave me a picture-perfect bow and strode off toward Chuo-doori. What was that all about? And who was Hamada? The name did sound kind of familiar, but I didn't have time to worry about that right now. I had to get to work immediately so I could apologize to Richard.

I ran up the stairs and then, in the worst falsetto I could muster, pressed the intercom button and announced, "It's Seigi the milkman, here to deliver your milk!"

I gasped when the door unlocked.

"Richard, I'm sorry. I overslept."

“Oh my? The milkman? Ah ha ha ha ha!”

There were already customers in the store. A young married couple. The wife was pointing at me, laughing uncontrollably, while her husband just sat there, flabbergasted. After they left, Richard gave me a sullen look. *I know. That was totally inappropriate.*

“...Um, I am extremely sorry for doing something so rash and thoughtless.”

“Did something happen?”

“Huh?”

“It’s not like you to be late.”

I felt a little ashamed as I honestly confessed that I had simply overslept and that nothing had happened. Richard’s expression softened. “I see,” he said gently.

He seemed concerned about me. That just made me feel even worse. He could have just scolded me. Richard smiled when he saw the pathetic look on my face.

“You had an information session yesterday, and you went drinking with the alumni you’ll be shadowing afterward, right? And you’ve had a number of papers to write on top of all that. You’ve been working very hard.”

“Well...that’s all stuff I need to deal with myself. I only mentioned a bit of it when we were practicing English, so I’m surprised you remember it all. You could just scold me like normal.”

“Very well, then scold you I shall. ‘That was inappropriate behavior for the workplace. Please take more care in the future.’”

“I will,” I said, lowering my head. Richard was still smiling.

I had been continuing my English lessons with Professor Richard, telling him about what was going on in my life while he practiced with me. I didn’t tell him every last detail of what I was up to, but he generally knew about my assignments and deadlines and whatnot. Still, I’d never expected him to baby me because of it. This was just stuff I had to buckle down and do.

Richard had barely ever scolded me since everything that went down in

London. I didn't feel like he was being weird around me—if anything, he looked more at ease than usual—so it didn't worry me too much, but it did keep me on my toes. I would have to be more careful going forward. I'm sure he didn't want his sunnier mood to be spoiled.

“Um, so who's our next customer?”

“Some customers from my time in Hong Kong. It should be your first meeting, so make sure you introduce yourself properly.”

“Understood.”

Hong Kong. That's where Richard had worked after his time in Sri Lanka, before he came to Ginza. That was right... I'd run into a woman whom Richard had known from his time in Sri Lanka at Tokyo Station recently.

Wait. Something twinkled in the sea of my memories. I remembered now.

“That's right...her last name is Hamada, isn't it?”

“Seigi?”

“Oh, it's something that happened on my way in. Someone outside the building asked me if I knew Ms. Darling.”

“Ms. Darling?”

I panicked when he asked me who that was. Maya Hamada was a jewelry designer from Kyoto. When I encountered her this spring in Tokyo, I didn't know her name. She kept saying “darling,” so I had started calling her “Ms. Darling” in my head. Obviously, there was no way Richard could have known that.

“Maya Hamada from Kyoto,” I explained, and Richard looked puzzled.

“...How strange. I've never had someone come here looking for her. The closest I can remember is receiving a phone call from someone she referred to me. Did this person really say they were looking for her?”

“I'm pretty sure he was at least. He ran off the moment I talked to him, though.”

The beautiful man fell silent and sipped his royal milk tea. Richard must have

made it himself. That said, it looked like he'd only made one pot, so it was still going to be my job to make it for the rest of the day. It was early summer. I needed to be careful not to make too much. Before long, we'd be enjoying it on ice.

Our next customers were a father and his daughter. They called each other "Dad" and "Yuna" respectively. The daughter was about my age, and her father looked like he was in his fifties. They both had similar round faces. They seemed to be enjoying themselves, chatting up a storm while they drank their royal milk tea. They must have been pretty wealthy if they had gone to Hong Kong together to buy gemstones.

"Richard, do you have the pearls I asked about?"

"Of course."

The beautiful jeweler slipped into the back room, and before long, returned with his box of wonders. It was a velvet box, and today it was concealing a selection of pearls. I wondered what form they'd take—would they be loose? Or made into earrings? A variety of possibilities ran through my head in the few seconds it took before Richard silently opened the lid.

I nearly let out a groan by accident when I saw what was inside the box, but I just barely kept it in. My feelings, though, I couldn't hold back.

"Wha—Richard, are those really pearls?"

I remembered I was an employee speaking in front of customers right after I opened my mouth and just narrowly managed to rephrase my interjection. I'd been messing up a lot today. I needed to be more careful.

That said, the jewels in the box really didn't look like pearls.

Somehow or other it had been a whole year since I'd started working at Jewelry Étranger. Étranger specialized in colored stones from South Asia, so I hadn't been exposed to pearls very often, but I at least knew what they looked like. They could range in color from white to black and were perfectly round with a shiny luster. They came from clams. Just about any junior high schooler in Japan knew that Ago Bay in Mie Prefecture was famous for its cultured pearls.

But these pearls were pink, and they largely lacked that shiny luster. If I had to describe them, I might compare them to colorful chocolate candies for children. That was what their pink finish reminded me of. They lacked that sense of translucence that made one feel like they might melt away into nothing, and they were shaped strangely to boot—not spherical like normal pearls, but more of an acorn shape. Upon closer inspection, some had little brown grains of some kind on their surface.

The daughter giggled when she saw the dubious look on my face.

“You certainly don’t know much about jewels, for someone who works at a jewelry shop. I think that’s a rather clever act. It can be hard for customers to say anything when everyone at the shop is looking at them like ‘You can ask us anything.’ Was this a change you made in response to your assistant back in Hong Kong? Talk about intimidating.”

“Yuna.”

While the father was scolding his daughter, Richard brought out another smaller box. This one had a pearl necklace in it. It was a colorful necklace, made up of white pearls, orange-ish pearls, and peacock-green black pearls. They were all beautiful, perfect spheres, too. Yeah, those were the pearls I knew.

The beautiful jeweler looked at me, seemingly guessing what I was about to say from the look on my face.

“Seigi, what do you think is the difference between these pearls here and those pink ones?”

“Um...”

I looked at the customers to ask their permission to continue. I’d assumed Richard would give me a private lesson about it once they left, but the customers were both looking at me with big grins on their faces. *All right, I get it.* I guess they were expecting me to demonstrate my worth as part of this new “act.”

“They’re different colors!”

Richard silently made an X with his fingers. Why did he look so composed? And he was so beautiful, I couldn’t even be mad at him. Of course they were

different colors, but that was too obvious. Their luster and composition didn't look the same as normal pearls, either.

"I guess they're different shapes? These basic pearls are perfect spheres."

I got another X in response. The father and daughter seemed to be enjoying this exchange between Richard and me. I guess this was a customer service thing, too.

"You are correct—they are different shapes. However, even pearls of this kind have examples of 'baroque' pearls, which have rather unique forms. They're often irregularly shaped and sought-after by pearl aficionados."

Which meant the main difference between these two kinds of pearls wasn't color or shape. This was harder than I'd thought. What *was* different about them? Should it have been obvious just from looking at them?

I grimaced and tilted my head. Richard giggled, mouthing, "Bravo," at me.

"Seigi, the answer is that they come from different shellfish."

Different shellfish. They come from different shellfish. I see. But wait—

"Are you expecting me to fire back with a 'How was I supposed to know that?!' here?"

"I thought it would be a simple problem to solve, given your powers of perception."

"Hey, now..."

"Sorry for putting you on the spot like that. The pink ones are called conch pearls. They're pearls made by conchs rather than oysters—hence the name."

Yuna spoke up to help me out. I guess it made sense. If they'd been coming to Richard since his time in Hong Kong, they must have been pretty knowledgeable about gems.

"...Conch pearls, right? I've never heard of that before."

"I think that's not terribly unusual. Oysters and scallops are flat bivalves, but conchs have big spiral shells with spikes on them. The inside of the shell is this shiny pink, just like these pearls."

“You really know your stuff!”

“I do have one sitting in my entryway after all. Don’t I?” The daughter said cheerfully, looking at her father. He, meanwhile, smiled a bit more awkwardly.

“Admittedly, I don’t know nearly as much about precious stones as my daughter, so I do appreciate the explanation.”

I get it now. My little exchange with Richard just now was a performance meant to let the father save face.

As the conversation continued, Yuna told us about herself. She was nineteen years old and wanted to become an engineer. After failing her first attempt, she had been accepted into a prestigious American university this year. What an incredible person.

The school year started around September in the West. She’d be moving soon and probably wouldn’t be able to come home to Japan often. So to commemorate her achievement, her parents were going to give her a set of pearls. And not just regular pearls but the conch pearls she was so fond of.

“I know we’ve been thinking about this for a few years now, but it must have been difficult to acquire so many conch pearls. Thank you, Richard.”

“I’m very pleased to hear that, but I think it would be best to save your thanks for when the pieces are complete. I have the designs I showed you last time, but would you like to take another look?”

“What would you like to do, Yuna?”

“I’d like to take another look at it. I love the design.”

With that, what looked like a life-size design of the necklace and earrings was spread out on the table. The three of them started placing the conch pearls on the design as they compared them and made conversation. When a good opportunity presented itself, I served them some red bean cakes from a famous store in Ginza that you could only get with a reservation. After that, the two of them said their goodbyes and left the shop.

Once Richard had put the pearls and jewelry design away, I raised my hand and announced in English that I had a question for Professor Richard, just like I

did over the phone on nights when we were both free. Professor Richard responded with a simple “sure.” It felt strange that a phrase that would be so much longer in Japanese could be such a short sound in English. But in Richard’s voice, it sounded just as graceful as any word would. His voice had a way of calming my heart.

“Did it really take that long to find all those pearls?”

“Oh, we’re switching back to Japanese now, are we?”

“Look, I don’t know those complicated words in English. Like, in my mind, pearls are a precious gem that Japan had invented a way to culture, and the technology spread around the world. So can’t you just produce them?”

I remembered reading about the process of culturing pearls in one of my junior-high civics textbooks. They opened up the oysters and slipped an object that became the center of the pearl inside, closed them back up again, and returned them to the ocean—a revolutionary system for producing pearls. Of course, it wasn’t 100 percent effective, but thanks to recent technology, pearls had become much more broadly available, compared to the days when divers searching for natural pearl oysters was the only source.

I explained as much to Richard, who smiled and opened his mouth.

“Question.”

He continued in English, asking how bivalves were opened, since bivalves and snails were both pearl-producing shellfish?

Hm. Well, bivalves seemed obvious. You just stuck a knife between their shells and pried them open. Then you threw them on a grill, roasted ’em with some butter and soy sauce, and dug in. Professor Richard frowned at me. I guess I’d gone off on a little too much of a tangent there. Right—if you eat what’s inside, it can’t make pearls. You just have to open them up, stick the base of the pearl inside, close them back up, and return them to the water like nothing ever happened.

Richard then asked how that would work with snails. Snails. Because I’d just been thinking about roasting scallops, all I could think of was turbo sazae. How would you get what’s inside a spiral shell to come out and say hi? I guess if you

removed the parts of the shell closing it in, then—oh.

“Snails...can’t be closed once they’re opened, can they?”

I got an “exactly” in response. Of course. Various pieces of information were beginning to come together in my mind. Differently shaped shellfish. How culturing works. The fact that you couldn’t close the shells back up once they were opened. How much time it took to collect all those pearls—

“Ahh! That’s why it matters that they’re different shellfish! If you can’t open and close the shells, you can’t culture the pearls!”

“Bravo. I’m impressed you got there so quickly. As you might imagine, thanks to the shape of their shells, conch pearls cannot be cultured.”

“So it’s completely impossible?”

“There have been some successes in recent years, but it’s still a long way from being commercially viable.”

So that’s why it took so long to acquire so many.

“Where do they find the conchs that produce conch pearls?”

“They primarily live in the area between the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea. The interior of their shells is the same beautiful pink as their pearls.”

Which meant the conch adorning that customer’s entryway was probably a souvenir from the Gulf of Mexico or the Caribbean Sea. She was planning to go to college in the US, too—she really was quite the globe-trotter.

That reminded me that I never asked her family name. Richard had just called them “Ms. Yuna” and “Mr. Takaomi.”

“As pearls are biominerals produced by mollusks, from a mineralogical perspective, they are considered different from stones. But they have an extremely long history of being used to adorn beautiful accessories. From an aesthetic perspective, there is no doubt that they are gemstones.”

“Thanks. You really do know everything, don’t you? By the way, Richard, how should I refer to those customers who—”

“Excuse me. It seems something happened.”

Richard interrupted me, looking over to Étranger's entrance. After a moment, the intercom sounded. We didn't have any other appointments.

The voice over the intercom said hello and asked if they could come inside, and Richard responded by asking who they were and saying he'd have to ask them to leave if they were here to solicit something. The man identified himself as Shinichirou Komatsu and asked to come in. When I heard his voice, I recalled the man I had run into on my way into work that morning. When I saw the image from the door camera, I knew it was definitely him.

"Richard, that's the guy I mentioned earlier."

That happened over an hour ago. Had he been waiting out there the whole time for the customers to leave? There's no way, right?

The man continued, saying he'd prefer to talk inside. Richard looked a bit concerned, but he released the lock on the door and went to greet the customer.

"Hello. My name is Shinichirou Komatsu."

The man in the plain suit spoke much more clearly than he had when I first met him. He had a very striking face, either because he had a tendency to speak with his eyes wide open or because he just had rather large eyes to begin with. Even though I'd already told him about how suspiciously the man had been acting that morning, the beautiful jeweler smiled his usual smile. Richard could be a bit scary in moments like these. He was like a very composed king of the savannah, aware that there was no need to panic over small details, but possessed of sharp fangs and even tougher claws.

"Welcome to Jewelry Étranger. My name is Richard, and I am the proprietor of this establishment. Are you looking for a particular gemstone or piece of jewelry?"

"This is where I have come from."

Mr. Komatsu offered Richard his business card. The text was small, so I couldn't really get a good look at it, but I could make out the words "Research Institute." I guess he must've been a graduate student or something. But what on earth did someone like that want with Étranger?

The man took a seat in one of the red lounge chairs, without being encouraged to, and posed Richard a question.

“I believe you’re in charge of this place. Are you familiar with a Mr. Hamada?”

“Hamada. I could not say for certain.”

“Mr. Hirotake Hamada.”

Huh? That was not the name I was expecting. I was sure he had some connection to Maya Hamada. Maybe this Hirotake person was a relative of hers? Richard hesitated for a moment before replying, “Yes.”

“I have encountered him several times since I began renting this storefront.”

“You’ve known each other since you lived in Hong Kong, correct? I’m told you’re rather close.”

“With all due respect, may I ask from precisely whom you heard that from?”

“...It really is unusual to see a foreigner who can speak like that.”

“I do hear that on occasion.”

Mr. Komatsu looked a little awkward on receiving such an eloquent and beautiful response to his offhand comment, but he replied, “Oh, really?” with a smile. I couldn’t decide if I should serve tea or not, so my brain cells had a meeting and came to the unanimous conclusion not to. We still hadn’t figured out why he was even here, so vigilance was the correct option.

“No need to be so defensive. My question is a very simple one.”

Simple, huh? I wondered what it could be. Mr. Komatsu’s eyes widened, and he finally opened up.

“When you met Mr. Hirotake Hamada, did he seem happy to you?”

Huh?

It wasn’t just me—Richard seemed to have the same reaction. What the hell was that supposed to mean? Was there really some research institute in Japan in this day and age that would send someone all the way to Ginza just to ask a question like that? I was so baffled, I didn’t know how to react. Just who was this guy?

My beautiful boss maintained his courteous expression as he smiled faintly. I was probably the only one who could tell how unsettling that was—like he was checking to make sure he still had his knife hidden in his pocket. Mr. Komatsu looked out the window, staring at the cars in the showroom across the street.

“Now, I am a mere foreigner after all. I would not be in any position to conjecture as to whether Mr. Hamada was happy or not.”

“I see. Perhaps the question was too abstract. When you last spoke, did Mr. Hamada appear to be enjoying himself? What did you talk about? When you were with him, did he seem preoccupied with money?”

“I am not one to violate someone’s privacy, whether they are my customers or not. Mr. Hamada’s office is on the first floor of this building. Perhaps you would have more luck asking there. I’m sure you’ll find people quite a bit more familiar with him.”

“You really do have a silver tongue,” Mr. Komatsu mumbled under his breath before thanking Richard, bowing, and leaving Étranger as if nothing at all had happened. Richard gently massaged the bridge of his nose. I didn’t need him to say anything, I knew this was a job for royal milk tea.

“Your order: hot or iced?”

“Hot with ice in it.”

“A forced iced royal, got it.”

I prepared the tea at the speed of light and set out a packet of fruit jelly sweets that I’d been saving for this afternoon. Richard chuckled.

“Bravo.”

“You’re very welcome. I’m relieved that you don’t seem as exhausted as I thought you were.”

“You’re such a worrywart.”

Richard took a sip of his tea and then began with a “well, then.” His voice had lost its glossy facade and was a touch cold, but otherwise sounded normal.

“What a strange person. I haven’t the faintest idea what he was after.”

“Hey, so, who’s this Hirotake Hamada person?”

“The owner of this building. Have you forgotten? It’s in Étranger’s address: the Hamada Building on Nanachome.”

“...Oh!”

That’s right. There was a metal plate on the wall in front of the stairs. I had never given it much thought before, but it definitely did say “Hamada Building” on it. I was sure Richard had told me the building name at least once before, but I’d completely forgotten about it.

Mr. Hamada. That’s right. The building’s owner, who used to run a café in the location Étranger was now occupying.

“...They have the same surname, so is he related to Ms. Darling or something?”

“Not as far as I’m aware. It must be a coincidence. I see—that’s the source of your misunderstanding.”

He hit the nail on the head. Now that I thought about it, though, the reason Richard rented this place in particular was because he had known the building owner back when he was working in Hong Kong. The customers who were just here were also acquaintances of his from Hong Kong. Could they have been—

I timidly posed the question, and my beautiful boss nodded matter-of-factly.

“The customers who came by the shop earlier were Mr. Hamada’s son and granddaughter.”

I was glad. Now I knew how to address them next time they came to the shop: Mr. Hamada and Ms. Hamada. But that just made things even stranger. When I ran into Mr. Komatsu on my way in, Yuna and Takaomi weren’t in the shop yet. And when they did arrive, they didn’t say anything about a strange man being outside. They were in a good mood from the start.

But Mr. Komatsu seemed to have deliberately waited to come to the shop after they had left. What did that mean? It was hard to imagine he just wandered around Ginza after he ran into me and coincidentally ended up back at Étranger after they left. He must have waited for them to leave the shop

after he knew they were in here. But why? If he wasn't up to no good with those questions, why wouldn't he just ask the man's son and granddaughter if Mr. Hamada seemed happy?

Richard held the business card from Mr. Whoever Komatsu up to the light, took another sip of his tea, and disappeared into the back without a word.

Well, whatever. What I needed to do now wasn't to speculate wildly about things but to clean up, do dishes, and prepare tea and treats for the customers who would be here in thirty minutes. If nothing else, solving strange mysteries was definitely my boss's field of expertise.

I was sure this went without saying, but being late to your part-time job was a pretty big no-no. Being late repeatedly might as well be the same as having the phrase "Not Motivated" plastered on your forehead in big block letters. And I didn't want that. As enthusiastic as I was about my job hunt, I wanted to put effort into my part-time job at *Étranger*, too—especially now that I wasn't sure I had much time left here. So, after showing up late that one day, I made a concerted effort to come to *Étranger* a little early.

And there he was again. Mr. Komatsu, in his navy-blue suit and red necktie, awaited me in front of the first floor office.

"Good morning. Komatsu here. Do you mind if I come into the shop?"

That was probably his strategy—come in with the part-timer, and then he couldn't be turned away. I turned him down, saying I needed to clean the shop, and made him wait outside. I explained the situation to Richard when I got in. I expected him to chase him off, but my beautiful boss went out to greet the man with a calm look on his face.

Shinichirou Komatsu barely offered Richard a greeting, before explaining that he hadn't had the liberty to talk much last time, so he worried that Richard regarded him with suspicion now.

"My colleagues and I are researching the current happiness levels of people who came of age in postwar Japan. It may have been a period of great want in many respects, but it would be no exaggeration to say that these people were

the backbone of Japan's rapid economic recovery. You could say that Mr. Hamada's current lifestyle is a result of such impassioned efforts, too."

Mr. Komatsu put a bit of emphasis on the word *lifestyle*. He seemed to be making the argument that it was the hard work of people in the past that allowed us to enjoy such a comfortable lifestyle in modern-day Japan. If that was the point he was trying to make, though, he was about twenty years out of date.

He continued more or less as I had expected.

"But everyone has a different idea of what constitutes happiness. For instance, some feel that even if they have family, a life with no friends is a miserable one. That's why we're trying to ask people with whom Mr. Hamada has friendly interactions about his day-to-day demeanor. I brought a simple questionnaire along with me, so you're welcome to write down your answers if anything is too troublesome to describe verbally. I've already received permission from his family."

"Could you be more specific?"

"His son, Takaomi Hamada."

Takaomi Hamada—the round-faced older man who was here the other day. So had he met him? And he'd given the okay to Mr. Komatsu?

That seemed odd. This guy definitely did dress well and seemed smart, and based on Richard's reaction to his business card, that research institute must be real, but I didn't feel like his actual motivation for asking these questions was totally clear yet. If they just needed a figure for happiness levels in elderly folks, surely a random sample would be sufficient, right? I learned that in my stats class. Or you could take samples based on income or something. So why was he so preoccupied with the owner of this building?

Richard watched Mr. Komatsu for a moment before getting up without a sound. He went over to the potted pomegranate tree, picked something up from next to it, and returned to the lounge.

It was a large shell, the same size as the ones monks used as instruments at certain events. It had spiky bits, like a sea pineapple. The exterior was a velvety

brownish color, but the inside was a soft pink. Could it be...

“This is a conch shell.”

“Oh, did Mr. Hamada give that to you? Was it a gift to commemorate something?”

“No,” Richard declared. The menace in that brief comment made me imagine a blade that could slice a watermelon in two with a single stroke—a blade so sharp, the edge shone.

Mr. Komatsu responded with a bewildered smile. “...Um, no to what exactly?”

“Do you know what region this species inhabits, Mr. Komatsu?”

“Um, you got me there. I’m not here to answer riddles—”

“Seigi.”

My boss called my name. Just leave it to me. I didn’t know where Richard was going with this, but I did know the answer to his question.

“Conchs live in the waters to the south of North America, between the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea.”

“Precisely.”

Mr. Komatsu’s expression abruptly shifted when I answered. Richard was looking at the besuited man with eyes as cold as ice. Mr. Komatsu didn’t stand a chance. Étranger was like Richard’s castle, after all. It was a magical lair where every angle made this already perfect and beautiful man look even better.

“I see you do have some idea.”

“.....”

“Even your silence speaks volumes. There was no reason for you to come all the way here if you have no intention of speaking. If you would like to know more about the tiny islands in that beautiful ocean, or the lives of the people living there, I would strongly recommend that you visit the countries of the Caribbean, or perhaps their embassies, rather than a jeweler in Ginza. Now, I must ask you to leave,” Richard announced without a trace of a smile on his lips.

Mr. Komatsu must have known he'd lost, because he got up without saying a word, offered one courteous bow, and left. I was relieved the showdown had ended peacefully, but I couldn't understand what had happened.

"...Just what was that?"

"I'll explain later. Although he did say something that is bothering me. Seigi, our most important customers of the day are the Yasaka family. When they arrive, I want you to—"

"Entertain them with tea and snacks, right? You have something you need to do, don't you? Don't worry. Take your time."

I heard him call my name when I got up and headed to the kitchen. I thought he needed my help with something, but Richard had also gotten up and was looking at me with a tender expression.

"I feel as though you've become more dependable as of late. Or is it just my imagination?"

"...I hope you'll say it's not."

"As do I. Thank you."

Richard smiled at me and vanished into the back room. I could hear him talking on the phone as I focused on preparing tea.

I had to hold back a dopey smile from forming on my lips. Our next customer was going to have two small children in tow, so I couldn't serve anything in breakable glass. This was the perfect opportunity for the plastic kids' meal cups from back when this place was still a café to make their appearance. But, man, I really was happy. I couldn't stop myself from smiling.

Richard *thanked me*. He said he thought I was dependable. His smile was beautiful enough to start, but boy, a direct hit from his charm sure packed a punch. I was glad he'd withdrawn to the back room, because I was pretty sure my face wasn't going to go back to normal for a while.

I thought I'd have a moment longer to enjoy the feeling, but then the tea nearly boiled over and I had to rush to turn the burner off. That was close. I'd nearly made the image of the dependable Seigi Nakata vanish like a puff of

smoke.

When I finished preparing the tea, I went to poke my head into the back room and see how Richard was doing, but I could still hear him talking on the phone. I hoped everything would be okay. I'd missed my chance to ask what it was that was bothering him.

The answer to my concerns came sooner than I'd expected. That evening, just as the shop was about to close, the Hamadas dropped by Étranger. They must have been whom Richard was talking to on the phone.

"I apologize for the sudden call. But it seemed odd to me that this investigator claimed to have received your permission."

"You're talking about Mr. Komatsu, right? He came to our house. He said he was a member of a government think tank working on recommendations to combat poverty and wanted to talk about Grandpa."

Government think tank? If my job-hunting knowledge wasn't mistaken, those were like the brains behind a lot of government organizations. Like if members of the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly or the Diet wanted to propose a bill to, for example, combat poverty, they might go to a think tank to have them perform some preliminary research to help guide policy development. What was someone like that doing here, though?

Takaomi, who was much less guarded than he was the last time he came to the shop, looked bewildered.

"I didn't think it was anything serious... My father is currently resting in a home for the elderly, so I figured I could speak a bit on the topic from the perspective of his son."

Richard hesitated for a moment after Takaomi finished speaking, "So you spoke to him about Hirotake."

Hirotake was the owner of this building, if I wasn't mistaken. Takaomi looked at Richard as if to ask what he meant by that, and Richard showed him his phone. It was a text exchange. Ooh. I'd always assumed old folks had a hard time using cell phones, but the owner of this building seemed to have no trouble in that department.

Richard had informed him of Mr. Komatsu's visit this morning and included a link to the research institute he belonged to. Hirotake had responded with just one sentence:

"Understood. Talk to them for me."

Hirotake's icon was a photo—a silhouette against a nondescript beach. Yuna pointed it out, laughing and saying it was a photo of her. It was one of the photos they had taken last fall on a family trip to Enoshima.

"It was right after that that he moved into a retirement home by himself, saying that he'd be able to do whatever he wanted afterward. He sounded very unworried about the move."

I guess his wife had already passed. He could have moved in with Takaomi, but he apparently said he'd prefer to be alone and that he didn't want to be a burden.

"I've never considered my father a burden, but Yuna had just decided to reapply to her dream school, so he must have been worried about her. Oh...you know, now that I think about it, there was one thing that never made any sense to me. When I told Mr. Komatsu that he should speak directly to my father if he wanted to know about him, he rejected the idea, saying, 'That would not be acceptable.'"

"He said he couldn't ask him directly because he was elderly. I started to get suspicious that he might be more interested in probing us than learning about Grandpa, but he did have proper documentation proving where he worked, and he never spoke about anything but how well the family got along. But I guess both you and Grandpa think it could become an issue later, huh, Richard?"

This beautiful jeweler was definitely thinking so. He wouldn't have gone out of his way to call them to *Étranger* if he didn't. And even now, his beautiful face was much gloomier than usual. He was probably feeling guilty for causing them trouble. Or...

...there was something else he was worried about.

After the guests enjoyed their tea for a bit, Richard began to speak in a grave tone.

“...I am unsure if this is an appropriate topic to discuss, but it was a direct request from Hirotake himself. That said, all I am able to do is speak. Takaomi, are you familiar with the term ‘Japanese Dominicans’?”

Dominican? What’s that? Wait, I’d definitely heard that word before. It was a place. More specifically, a country—I think. Right, the Dominican Republic, that’s a thing.

“It’s right here,” Richard said, showing them a map of the Caribbean in a book he’d taken off the shelf. He could have pulled up a map on his phone just as easily, but a physical book was much more convenient to show to multiple people at once.

Mexico stood between the expanse of North America and South America, like an off-kilter bridge. To its east stretched the Caribbean Sea, which was dotted with various islands. The largest and most conspicuous of them was Cuba, with Haiti and the Dominican Republic further eastward. The island, which was about the size of Sakhalin, was split between the two countries. *I see. It’s a small country.*

So people emigrated there from Japan?

“It relates to Japanese government policy right after World War II. Postwar Japan was struggling with an influx of repatriates who needed jobs. Around the same time, the government signed a treaty with the Dominican Republic, whereby the Dominican Republic accepted Japanese migrants who would engage in agricultural development. Those people are the Japanese Dominicans. Does any of this sound familiar to either of you?”

“...Um, we’ve never heard about any of that. Right?” Yuna looked over at her father, who had a severe expression on his face.

“What year was that exactly?”

“In 1956, I believe.”

“And my father told you about this?”

“Indeed he did.”

“I understand. Please continue.”

Richard nodded. For a moment, it almost felt like the shop had turned into a time machine. We were talking about postwar Japan—around the same time my grandma ran out of patience with my veteran grandfather and decided to try to make it as a single mother with her daughter, who was my mother, Hiromi. And when she became a pickpocket. I had to imagine it was a time where so many people were struggling that it was difficult to do anything about it.

Richard remained dispassionate as he went on to explain that the Japanese government had used some extremely tempting incentives in its recruitment—including large tracts of free land—which encouraged families who were in need of a new start to apply. More than two hundred households applied for the program, with whole families intending to make the move together. This was a period when large tanker-like ships were a more common means of international travel than airplanes. They crossed the Pacific Ocean through the Panama Canal into the Caribbean Sea, a voyage that took about a month.

“At the time, the Dominican Republic was led by what we might call a dictator. It would be difficult to claim the country had positive relations with its neighbors, considering the rather perilous atmosphere between the Dominican Republic and the nation it shares a border with, Haiti. To put it another way, you might say it speaks to just how far—both politically and geographically—Japanese people had to go to find a country that would accept them after the war.”

The Dominican Republic. Haiti. Both countries on the other side of the world. It was hard to imagine how any Japanese characters might be joining the cast of this story. But—

—one of the people who made that journey was none other than Hirotake.

Takaomi ground his teeth when Richard said that. Yuna, meanwhile, just sort of vaguely smiled in disbelief before her expression grew more serious.

“Now that you mention it...when I asked Grandpa where the shell decorating the entrance to our house came from, he said that it was a ‘gift from a faraway island.’”

“Did that shell look something like this?” I said, gently setting the conch shell

from my earlier conversation with Richard on the table.

“Yes, exactly!” Yuna said excitedly before growing serious again. Where had they thought the shell came from?

Takaomi slowly began to speak, as if a heavy, locked door was finally being opened.

“...My father was in Southeast Asia during the war. He’d been working there as an electrical engineer since before the war, but once the tide started to turn against Japan, he ended up in a prisoner of war camp before returning to Japan. At least, that’s the story I’ve heard...”

“And then he founded a retail electronics company?”

“Yes. Well, I think it was less a company and more just a shop at the time. It was founded in 1964, as far as I know. I was three years old. Come to think of it, he never told me what he was doing right after the war ended.”

Huh. That seemed odd. If Hirotake had applied to emigrate and made the trip to the Dominican Republic in 1956, and then founded his company in Japan in 1964, he couldn’t have been in the Dominican Republic for very long. Did he come right back to Japan? If so, why?

After taking another sip of his royal milk tea, Richard began to speak again.

“Japan and the Dominican Republic had signed a bilateral treaty. However, the Dominican government was less interested in using the immigrants as farmers than as settler colonists to strengthen their border with Haiti. To the Japanese government, which was wrestling with concerns over deteriorating public order as a result of mass unemployment, it seemed like a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

As it turned out, however, what awaited the families who had come all the way from Japan wasn’t the vast parcels of farmland they were promised...but tiny areas of wilderness. The Dominican Republic was part of the Spanish-speaking world, so they didn’t even speak the language. The majority of the immigrants had traded their savings, seeds, and equipment to start their farms in the Dominican Republic. Even if they did beg for help, the Japanese government was a whole world away. They barely had functional international

phone lines back then, let alone the internet. They were stuck between a rock and a hard place and didn't know what to do.

Despite the odds stacked against them, the immigrants made the best of it and tried to cultivate the land all the same—never knowing how their own homeland had betrayed them.

“It was later discovered that the Japanese government was, in all likelihood, aware of the Dominican Republic's true intentions. They would accept the Japanese immigrants but only grant them the right to cultivate a small plot of land—not *own* the land itself.”

“Wait, wouldn't that normally be considered fraud?” Yuna asked.

Richard nodded. Takaomi and I were at a complete loss for words. It was hard to believe Richard's vast knowledge extended to even a topic like this, which only the most informed of Japanese people would know about. I mean how many people in Japan even knew what the term “Japanese Dominican” meant?

Obviously, Hirotake did. He'd experienced it all firsthand—and he was the one who told Richard all about it.

“According to Hirotake, they worked themselves to the bone for three years. At the end of those three years, they ultimately decided to go home. When his young wife started to show signs of being pregnant, someone asked him if going back to Japan with no savings or anyone to depend on was the right choice. He had to think about it—he had grown accustomed to life in the Dominican Republic, but would it be better to raise his child there or back in his home country?”

I guess that child was Takaomi. If the family moved to the Dominican Republic in 1956 and left three years later, when the wife was pregnant, that would mean the child was born in about 1960. It did line up with how old Takaomi looked, anyhow.

And then he grew up, got married, and had a daughter. And now that daughter was planning to study abroad in America. Looking at the map in the atlas, the southern part of the US was pretty close to the Dominican Republic.

Both Takaomi and Yuna had fallen silent, but Takaomi was the first to speak.

“When exactly did my father tell you all this?”

“About a year and a half after we first met in Hong Kong. I believe you’re aware that your father and I had met each other tens of times at that point, though I had yet to meet you.”

Oh, I see. So Hirotake was Richard’s first point of contact with the Hamada family, back when he was working in Hong Kong. And then he introduced him to the rest of the family from there. I was sure he was the one who suggested renting this space in Ginza to Saul, too...and, well, here we were.

It felt weird to think about how Richard was already selling gemstones back when I was still in high school. It wasn’t hard to imagine he’d been as beautiful as a gemstone even back then, though.

Takaomi had a mix of emotions on his face.

“...My father seemed so happy when he met you. He told me, ‘Takaomi, I’ve met this Englishman in Hong Kong who can speak Japanese and Spanish.’ After that, he started making frequent trips to Hong Kong. For some reason, my father was quite good at Spanish, specifically. He always loved to travel, and had mentioned there being people from various countries in his POW camp, so I never thought he’d learned it as anything other than a hobby...”

Takaomi was starkly silent for a while. Neither Richard nor Yuna said a word. He let out a little sigh when he finished his tea.

“I’m sorry, Richard. I’m sure you don’t want to talk about it, but as his son, I’m obligated to ask—why did my father tell you all this but not his own son? Right now, I feel a strange anger toward you. And I’m struggling to accept what you’re telling me. I’ve been helping my father run the business for a long time and now feel confident that I’m his equal partner in the company. And yet...” A bitterness tinged his soft voice. “Why?”

I know I’d be shocked if someone who wasn’t even family had told me about my grandma’s story. I’d wonder why she never told me, her family—her own flesh and blood.

The jeweler who looked like a beautiful doll always had a certain steadfast gleam in his blue eyes when he was put in positions like this. I knew what that

light was called—kindness, tenderness, or perhaps consideration. It was softer and warmer than any comforter could possibly be.

“...Takaomi, do you know what kind of shellfish pearls grow in?”

Takaomi was thrown off guard by that curveball. He had to think for a moment before responding, “No, I don’t. I do know it takes a very long time, though.”

“The substance created within a living oyster is called a biomineral. It can take a few months to several years for an oyster to produce a single pearl. Pearls have nothing to do with an oyster’s reproductive system—rather, they are the result of a protective response to an irritant inside an oyster. Oysters make pearls to protect their bodies. I hesitate to speculate on the topic, but perhaps Hirotake did not convey this information to you because he had, in a sense, turned those memories into a pearl.”

Turning memories into a pearl? What was that supposed to mean?

Like a pearl growing inside a conch in warm waters, Richard’s words continued to add layer on layer.

“When we met in Hong Kong, the topic Hirotake spoke to me about most often by far was his family. He often spoke about how his family’s happy smiles were what kept him going. An oyster, even after an irritant has been implanted, cannot produce a high-quality pearl if the environment it lives in is not a healthy one. In much the same way, I’m sure it was because of all the hardships he experienced that Hirotake wanted his children to live a life free of sorrow. Of course, keeping a secret from your loved ones is not easy, but neither is preparing oneself to disrupt their peaceful, everyday lives. And so, presumptuous as it may be of me to make this assertion, I believe that the person harboring the secret is often the one most damaged by it.”

“...I can understand that. My father was never one to talk about unpleasant things. No one in my family is, really. They’re all people who enjoy bringing joy to others and making them laugh.”

“I can sympathize. That said, I have no excuse for keeping this from you, and for that I must offer my most humble apologies.”

Richard got up from his chair and bowed deeply. Takaomi had an awkward look on his face.

“I don’t need an apology. After all, I’m the one who said something rude to you. You’ve done nothing but treat my father with kindness. I’m not very good at judging the ages of people from other countries, but I imagine you’re about my son’s age. I’m sure I would get an earful from Yuna if I were cruel to you.”

“I think you can relate, Dad. And Richard, you haven’t done anything wrong. Please take your seat. Grandpa was lucky to have someone he felt comfortable opening up to.”

The jeweler silently took his seat again. Our two guests looked like they were doing their best to digest what Richard had told them. I mean, who could blame them? They just had a big family secret thrown in their laps. But hang on a second.

“Um, so, uh, Richard.”

“What is it, Seigi?”

“So what does this Komatsu guy’s survey or whatever have to do with any of this?”

I mean, it had to have *something* to do with it, right? That had to be why Richard revealed Hirotake’s secret to them. Takaomi and Yuna’s expressions abruptly changed, like they just remembered the man in question, too.

Richard looked a little taken aback. With a scolding smile, he asked me to let him take a little break.

He enjoyed another cup of royal milk tea, then began the next chapter. It was like he was putting the finishing touches on a piece of jewelry.

“As I mentioned on the phone, Mr. Komatsu came to Étranger as well. I imagine he tried gathering information at the office on the first floor, but he grew frustrated when they wouldn’t tell him what he wanted to hear. I do not know if he was aware of the connection between this shop and Hirotake, but perhaps he knew of his fondness for gemstones and supposed that he might have a personal connection to me. It’s not terribly surprising that he ended up here.”

“Do you think he had some particular objective in investigating my father? Do you know about that, too, Richard?”

“Now, this is merely a theory...”

Richard went on to explain that most of the recommendations the think tank that Mr. Komatsu worked for were centered primarily on the subject of poverty reduction. Oh. I just realized how similar that sounded to my future plans. I wanted to become a civil servant to help people struggling with poverty.

He went on to speculate that there was a very high probability that Mr. Komatsu’s research was related to legislation focused on “self-reliance.”

“Hirotake has an extremely unique background, even among those who experienced the Dominican emigration program. Not only did he safely return to Japan and start a company, but it was an extremely successful company that survived the bursting of the bubble economy. Even now, he jointly owns a vast amount of property with you, his son. Cases like his are rare. You could see how his story might be misleadingly held up as an example of how ‘No matter how unfortunate your circumstances, with hard work, you can make your own success.’”

“...Was the fact that he safely returned to Japan rare in and of itself?”

“Those who returned penniless met a variety of different fates, but there were many others who did not return at all. I’m sure a lot of them would never have considered making the journey to the Dominican Republic in the first place if they’d had a support system in Japan. The descendants of those who were unable to return are citizens of the Dominican Republic, but I’m sure every single one of them walked a path of great hardship. There was even a massive lawsuit over a decade ago that sought an apology from the Japanese government for deceiving them. The plaintiffs were primarily people of about Hirotake’s age, if not older.”

Takaomi and Yuna were both speechless. I was similarly at a loss.

Those people had probably made the voyage to the Dominican Republic, just like Hirotake—only they’d stayed to farm the land. But it was a tiny island nation, not a country with vast resources. There was only so much their efforts could achieve. There had to have come a day when they realized it wasn’t what

they'd been promised...but they bore it regardless. Just like my grandma had.

No one could have been more keenly aware than those people of the fact that the time, lives, and potential they had spent would never be regained. The least they could ask for was an apology—from none other than their own homeland.

It felt like seeing a great black cloud pass before you, some massive avatar of woe that lived in a deep, dark pit. There was no closing up the pit to shut the thing away—all you could do was drop some food or coins into its depths as offerings to the titan hidden within.

"I think this is true of any country, but once people fall into poverty, they must endure extraordinary hardship as they attempt to regain a comfortable quality of life. If only such things were within an individual's ability to solve on their own..."

"...Grandpa was successful because he was an electronics nerd who loved new things and was sociable to a fault—but most of all because he was lucky. The fact that his shop didn't fold forty years ago was like winning a jackpot. It might seem like a funny story now, but that's really how unlikely it was."

"Yuna. Now, Richard, why do you think Mr. Komatsu kept asking if he seemed happy?"

Richard didn't say a word, and his expression was difficult to decipher.

Helping people below the poverty line to still lead fulfilling lives was a pressing issue in this country. The most obvious related topic of discussion was probably whether or not to give them welfare. The phrase "self-reliance," which seemed to suggest people should be able to help themselves, got thrown around. But the phrase was a total misnomer. It made it sound like people only succumbed to poverty because they just didn't put in the effort. It might be easier to think of poverty as something that resulted from being lazy, but I'd like to believe that if people heard the story of how my mother, Hiromi, fled domestic violence, they would realize it wasn't that simple. Single-parent households had a very high rate of poverty. Sure, some people might play the lottery and win, but there were a whole lot more people who lost.

Was there really anyone out there who could look at the workaholic Hiromi

and sincerely argue that it all came down to how hard you worked? I really doubted it. Or at least, I hoped not.

So, let's think about Hirotake Hamada's case. He was poor in the past, but not anymore. He left the Dominican Republic without a penny to his name and moved back to Japan, made a name for himself, and now owned this building in Ginza and introduced his son and granddaughter to jewelry shops on occasion. To my eye—and probably to his family's, too—he certainly seemed to be living a happy life. But obviously, it was possible that wasn't true. Maybe even *probable*.

The two Hamadas wore grim looks as Richard continued to speak.

"I know this was rather arrogant of me, but I asked Hirotake what he wanted when I explained the situation to him. He was emphatic that he absolutely did not want his story to hinder anyone struggling with poverty from getting the help they need."

"Of course he doesn't. That's Grandpa for you."

"I'm glad I still have his business card."

"It was Mr. Komatsu, right? I'll contact him. I'll tell him we've changed our minds and we don't want him using the data. He did tell us to contact him anytime if we had any issues. His organization works for the government, right? Surely they can't just ignore Grandpa's wishes, or ours."

Richard looked deeply relieved to see the two of them all fired up and ready to tackle the problem. I was, too.

If you truly could make it through the darkness and into the light through dint of hard work, that was cause for happiness. But I thought everyone ought to understand that there were far more people who weren't so lucky.

"Um, Richard." Yuna looked anxious.

"What is it?"

"Do you think it would be okay if we contacted Grandpa and asked him to tell us his story in light of all this? I mean, he didn't want us to know about his past, right?" She sounded worried.

“Of course it would be okay,” Richard said reassuringly. “This is only my opinion, but...I believe he would be quite happy if you did so. While he kept his past a secret, I do believe he needed someone he could confide in, which was why he allowed someone such as myself to help him shoulder the weight of that past. I imagine his joy will be increased manyfold if he were able to speak unreservedly with those close to him.”

Takaomi was silent. Richard still looked unusually grim, too. After a bit, the round-faced gentleman spoke.

“...My mother always said that my father wasn’t the kind to share his troubles with others, but how could they both keep such a huge secret from their own child?”

“You mean you really didn’t know? Not even that he was hiding something?”

“How could I have? My father didn’t really have any relatives...but I guess it is strange to think about. I could have just as easily grown up in the Caribbean.”

“Then you probably would’ve married a Latin beauty, huh, Dad?”

“Yuna...” This time, Takaomi’s sigh was absent the weighty tension that he had been carrying so far.

Things felt calmer, so I took the opportunity to go to the kitchen. When people relaxed, they got hungry.

I made some fresh tea and pulled some of the madeleines I kept for just such occasions from the snack shelf. Richard mail-ordered these from Osaka. They were made from rice flour and had black beans in them. They weren’t shell-shaped like standard madeleines, but considering how those pretty pink pearls could come from snail-shaped shells, these black bean-studded treats had to be visually appealing in their own way. I knew just how fluffy and delicious they were, because I enjoyed them one at a time with Richard not too long ago.

I quickly plated three sets of tea and madeleines and offered them to our guests with a smile. Yuna pointed and giggled.

“You know, I noticed you didn’t make any for yourself last time, too.”

“Huh? Oh, well, I usually eat later, so I don’t have to have any now.”

“Oh, come on, all four of us should eat together. Hurry up!”

“O-okay.”

I guess she was worried about me for some reason. There was something kind of mysterious about Yuna, even though she was younger than me. Were all rich girls like this?

I couldn't exactly stand around eating, so I took the empty lounge chair next to Richard and enjoyed my tea and snack. I hadn't realized how tense I was until I took the first bite, and the gentle sweetness spread through my body.

Once we were done, the Hamadas sped from the shop without asking to look at either the pearls or designs. It was already 6:30 in the evening. I needed to clean up quickly in case Richard had plans afterward.

“Richard, should I hurry up with the cleaning?”

“Do you have plans after this? Something you're in a rush to get to?”

“No, what about you?”

“I don't have anything planned that would prevent me from going out to dinner with you on a Saturday night.”

“Oh, man, you really don't have to worry about me that much. All I can offer in return is pudding, after all.”

“And in much the same way, *you* worry too much. It's only natural for me to be concerned about you.”

“I appreciate it, but...”

I couldn't bring myself to say the rest—that I might be leaving the shop soon. But I was pretty sure Richard knew, even if I didn't say it out loud. I had talked to him about how I might have to take more days off on our way back from the wedding reception not too long ago. He was smart—surely he knew what that was a lead-up to. I think that's why he was being extra nice to me lately—like someone seeing a ship off at port, trying their best to smile as the vessel pulled farther and farther away, until it was out of sight.

That was sad, though. I didn't want that.

On the other hand, I didn't really have the luxury to complain. The most I could manage was to thank him and pay my respects. Just as I was preparing to grab dinner somewhere before going home, Richard's phone began to buzz in his breast pocket.

Richard excused himself and withdrew to the back room. I'd seen the name "Hamada" on the phone screen, and judging from his expression, it wasn't Yuna or Takaomi. From what I could gather, Richard and the other Hamada were good friends, despite their difference in age. It was hard to imagine they'd be so close, if not.

I threw myself into cleaning Étranger's lounge and kitchen to Saul's strict standards. Just as I was finishing up, Richard came out of the office with a smile of relief on his face.

"He thanked me for helping him talk to his grandchild about something he had expected to have to take to his grave."

"Thought so."

Richard had his black suitcase with him. He must have finished packing to close up shop. I hesitated for a moment, but ultimately voiced what I'd been thinking about while cleaning.

"So, um, I was thinking, why don't you come over to my place?"

"Huh?"

I felt like I hadn't heard a "huh?" from Richard in a while. Was it really such a shocking question? I mean, he'd dropped me off at Takadanobaba Station a million times by now.

"I thought I'd make you dinner. It's kinda boring if you're always the one taking me out, right? I can't claim to be able to make anything fancy, but if there's anything in particular you'd like to eat, I'd be happy to."

"Don't you have plans to meet with that friend who'll be attending an information session with you next week? To work on questions to ask your workplace mentors? And isn't the company participating in next week's information session rumored to make hiring decisions based on the content of questions asked during such meetings?"

“Whoa, did I really tell you all that?”

“If you’re going to regret something, regret having the kind of brain that lets your every thought spill out of your mouth the moment you think it. If you have time to cook, I would recommend you get home immediately and strategize for your job hunt. I know you’ve been chronically sleep-deprived.”

“I get at least five hours a night, that’s plenty. A lot of my friends only get three or four...”

“Awful. Seven hours is the bare minimum amount of sleep humans ought to get each night.”

That was kind of impossible. I wouldn’t have any time to research companies or check job search sites if I did that. Plus, it wasn’t having any detrimental effects on my health, and I felt great every time I came to Étranger. But I hated making him worry.

“All right, then. I guess I’ll just go home and go to bed early tonight.”

“I think that’s the correct choice.”

“Yeah.”

There was a strange pause after I answered. Richard seemed to think I was going to say something else, but I wasn’t sure if I should. But when he noticed me waffling, I decided to come out with it.

“You know, I’d be lying if I said it didn’t make me happy that you were worrying about me. But I’m begging you—I just want things to be normal. I don’t want you to stress about things you don’t have to, especially after that weight was finally lifted off your shoulders. It’d be such a waste. And I don’t know you nearly as well as Saul or Jeffrey do. So—”

I felt a slight chill come over me. I smiled awkwardly. Richard was looking at me. It was strange. It was like the tender light in his blue eyes had vanished and been replaced with the color of an iced-over lake.

“I never asked you to be my emotional babysitter, or anything of the sort.”

The low tone of his voice made me realize my mistake. I did it again.

“...Sorry, I know I’ve been saying a lot of insensitive things lately. I’ll be more

careful.”

“I do not believe that’s the case, and I am not angry with you, either. On that note, take care. Good work today.”

“Thanks, boss. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Of course. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

We checked that the back room was locked and the lights were off, then we left the store. I heard a strange sound just as I was about to head down the stairs before Richard. What was that? Had Richard fallen? No. He was hitting the wall. What? I was sure Étranger had a contract with a security company—what if this summoned them?

He wasn’t looking at me as he took this bizarre action. His head was bowed, and there was a strange energy in the air. And his cheeks were twitching. Not like he was laughing but like he was grinding his teeth a little.

For some reason, my brain flashed back to a completely unrelated scene—an angry child outside a supermarket. The kid was standing there watching his mother talk with a friend of hers when I went into the store, and he was still out there with them when I left with my purchases. He never said a word, just stared intently at his mother, black eyes sparkling. His face was one of righteous indignation, like he felt he was justified in being upset.

Richard seemed like he had something he wanted to say as he slowly looked down at me. It was kind of...scary. What on earth was going on with him?

“Richard, what’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“If it wouldn’t be too much trouble...”

“Yeah?”

“Would you...”

“Yeah?”

“Join me for dinner before you go home?” He turned back to the wall again and said, “It’ll only take thirty minutes.”

A silence hung between us for a bit. Huh. I guess Richard *had* been planning

to have dinner with me today? Now I felt guilty about turning him down. I didn't know why he had such a sour look on his face, but he was just as pretty as ever. They did say that it helped the digestion to eat with a friend rather than alone.

"Okay, boss! You shoulda said so earlier. Let's get going! What do you wanna eat? Shiseido Parlor's great and all, but Café France-ya's rice gratin is incredible."

"Shiseido Parlor is the only option. If our time is limited, we should order there à la carte."

"We don't really have to hurry. We can go wherever you like—you're not going to let me pay, after all."

I wouldn't be able to forget the look in Richard's eyes for a while. If I wasn't mistaken, he was *angry*. But why? Why now? And why with me?

Richard must have noticed the confused look on my face, because he turned away and moved to lock up Étranger as he spoke.

"...If you're going to go there, I should note that you haven't let me pay you what I owe you for a very long time now."

"Huh?"

He didn't explain further. What Richard owed me? What would that be? He'd been paying me my wages. Was he talking about something like a tax refund? I was pretty sure I'd gotten the bank transfer for that already, though. Yeah, I got everything I was supposed to. What else could it be?

"Were you talking about money?"

"...It's nothing. Let's get going."

"Yessir! I think I'll get curry. What are you having, Richard?"

"I think I'll have an imported puppy that can't understand a word I say, boiled and roasted, and I'll chomp it down headfirst."

"...You want Korean?"

"I'll have croquettes. And both a strawberry parfait and their seasonal parfait."

“Whoa, sorry. I totally misheard you as something really weird. I’ve really gotta keep an eye on my blood sugar.”

“Yes, of course, I completely understand.”

He smiled his bone-chillingly beautiful smile at me for an instant, then took off. I followed my boss dragging his suitcase behind him as we headed to the red building just a stone’s throw away.

Later, Richard had the conch pearl jewelry set finished beautifully. It didn’t seem to be Ms. Darling’s work, but it was gorgeous and elegant nonetheless. When I saw Yuna try it on, I started clapping without thinking.

The necklace was made up of two thick lines of gold, tightly inlaid with square-cut diamonds. There was one conch pearl set between every three diamonds, like an accent. There were five conch pearls in total on the piece, all bordered with platinum. One conch pearl dangled from an earring on each ear. The pearls themselves were quite small, so despite the abundance of diamonds, the set still looked sweet and dainty. It was the kind of jewelry she wouldn’t be embarrassed to wear at a ceremony for a prestigious science award.

Yuna laughed when I told her she looked like a movie star, pouted, and said she never expected to hear something like that from someone so used to looking at Richard. I wanted to tell her she was wrong, but I refrained. To me, Richard’s beauty was like Mount Fuji at sunrise or the windswept sand dunes in a desert. Anyone else’s beauty was...very human. When I looked at Richard, I felt a mysterious calm, like if I were looking at a lake or the sky or the sea. Normal human features weren’t even in the same category. But if I said any of that out loud, I was pretty sure I’d offend literally everyone.

Takaomi, who had clapped just like I did, thanked Richard. He mentioned that the jewelry would be unveiled at Yuna’s going away party, and that Hirotake would of course be present, so he was very glad he’d had commissioned Richard for the piece. It seemed like his way of apologizing for his misdirected anger at Richard before.

Speaking of Hirotake—he was apparently still living it up at a luxurious old folks’ home, but Yuna said she thought he’d be home soon enough, because

he'd been sending her homesick texts lately.

Apparently, the family was thinking about taking a trip to the Dominican Republic after Yuna's move. There were no direct flights, so it would be a long trip. Whatever ended up happening, I was sure that, as Takaomi hoped, it would be a wonderful family vacation. The phrase "happy family" really suited them. It was like the entire family was protected by an oyster. But I knew luck had nothing to do with that—it was something each and every member of the family worked hard to maintain.

The conch shell that Richard had brought out during that conversation still adorned *Étranger's* bookshelves. Upon closer inspection, there was a hole in the back of the shell. Apparently, making a hole like that was the only way to check what was inside and remove the shell's contents. It was exceedingly rare to find a pearl inside—it was said that you might have to open *ten thousand* to find a single one.

What kind of luck does it take to ensure a person ends up happy? Is it being blessed with a family? Or keeping in good health? Never having to worry about money? The thing is, those were all things that might change as long as you remained alive. You'd never know what might happen next, all the way up until you were dead.

For a moment, I imagined a knife prying open the shell that was myself. I wonder if there would be a pearl inside?

And if there was, what kind of pearl would it be?

I didn't really care what sort of pearl it was. I just prayed there would be *something* in there. That way, I could take it to a knowledgeable jeweler and ask him what kind of gemstone it was. I was sure his dreamy blue eyes would closely examine the tiny grain and tell me what it was. I wouldn't even mind if he told me it wasn't a biomineral at all but an uninteresting piece of trash.

To have someone look upon the grain of truth hidden within the most tender part of yourself, and tell you their unvarnished opinion of it—I thought that would, without question, be cause for joy.

c a s e

2

Resplendent
Spinel



“PLEASE, NAKATA! I’m so sorry! But you’re my only hope!”

Combining a request with an apology is a pretty cowardly move, if you ask me. How are you supposed to say no when someone opens with that?

Honestly, I hadn’t really spoken to Takezawa from my exam prep class much at all. But since we were both aspiring civil servants exploring our options in the private sector while we prepared for the exam, and he often gave me advice when it came to statistics—one of my weaker subjects—we’d developed something of a friendship once the new semester started. I’d just assumed he was smart because he wore glasses, but it turned out to be true. What I hadn’t known was that he was in an orchestra music club.

It only just hit me that this was probably the first time the two of us had ever spoken to just each other, in private.

Takezawa was the vice president of an intercollegiate orchestra. He played second violin. When I heard “second” violin, I asked him how many kinds of violin there were in an orchestra, and he seemed a little astonished when he said it was just first and second. I didn’t have the opportunity to ask what the difference was.

Once every three months, the club had tea with the other schools along the Yamanote Line. This Friday was one such event. But Takezawa wasn’t going to be able to attend—not because of anything related to the job hunt but for a personal reason. He looked a little embarrassed, so I assumed it was a date. That’s youth for you.

Attendance was already looking sparse—like a comb missing a few teeth—so Takezawa was concerned about what the other club members might say if he told them he couldn’t make it, either. Which was why he was making an impassioned plea for someone to go in his stead. Annoyed, I nearly said, “What am I? Your lackey?” but stopped myself. I calmed down when he elaborated on what he wanted me to do.

“All you really have to do is serve tea. You’ve been working a service job part-time for a while now, right? It’s just a club, so we can’t pay you, but I know you’d be the right person to ask.”

Serving tea was what I did at my weekend job at Étranger. It was going to be annoying to figure out who'd told him about my job and how much he knew.

"Fine, I'll do it," I said. Takezawa was pleased. He went on to say that he'd be happy to assist with any math or science topics I needed help with, not just statistics. *I see...this might pay dividends in the future.* I had been planning to spend three hours studying for the exam at the library on Friday, but if I reallocated that time for a "change of pace," it should all balance out in the end.

And so, I found myself at Meguro Station. Once I passed the park at the top of the hill, the music hall came into view. The club event wasn't at the hall, though. It was being held in a conference room in the adjoining administrative building.

"Oh, Takezawa's replacement showed up! He really did! What a great guy!"

"Sorry for all the trouble our vice president has caused you. Umm, will you be playing an instrument? Or serving tea?"

"Tea. I'm Seigi Nakata. I have no musical training whatsoever..."

Takezawa had barely explained anything to me, but apparently, the club didn't just serve tea at these events—they were designed to make it easy for locals to spend some time experiencing music they rarely had an opportunity to interact with in their daily lives in Japan. They came to listen to elegant music while enjoying the 100-yen cookies and tea made from tea bags in paper cups. It was the kind of menu that would make a certain someone who was very particular about his tea ask for water, but this wasn't a jewelry shop in Ginza. It was an elegant event. If there'd been something like this in my neighborhood, I'd probably drop by, too. So.

"We thought just having tea didn't create enough of an impact, so we do costume themes every time. Last time, the theme was kimono, and the time before that, it was zombies. We've got pictures if you wanna see. We thought blood would be a bad idea for a café, so everyone put on green makeup for that one."

"We looked like we were going to war in the jungle or something."

"Well, it's not going to be that complicated this time. We're doing maids and

butlers.”

Oh, I get it now, Takezawa. This is why you wanted me to take over for you. As someone who always took a step back at the first sign of mischief, and never get involved in anything that might damage his reputation, I was sure the last thing he ever wanted to have to say was—

“Welcome home, milady!”

A group of three women screamed and giggled as they entered the shop.
“Milady?!”

Girls were to be addressed as “milady,” younger boys as “young master,” and married couples as “sir” and “madam.” I had to watch my tongue, since I could be careless with my words at times. I’m sure people would get mad at me if I addressed them as a married couple when they weren’t.

The room contained women dressed in maid costumes they’d bought to suit their own tastes, playing music that sounded like an easy listening CD to me. It was a simple yet elegant space, but it had the same energy as Shibuya on Halloween. As for me—I wore a white button-down, as I’d been instructed to, with a black apron over my jeans and a little black bow tie.

Some high school girl told me I looked great in my waiter’s apron, which really made my “welcome home”s more enthusiastic afterward. Apparently, it was pretty convenient to have someone with a loud voice and on the taller side, so they ended up having me stand outside by the sign. I was basically a barker at that point. I thought I was a little too plain to really draw in customers, but I guess it didn’t matter that much. In fact, if keeping weirdos out was also part of the job, maybe I was a good fit. I did have some confidence in my physical abilities.

“Welcome home! Our orchestral music club is holding a tea service. Please join us if you’re interested!”

“Welcome home, Young Master. The maids are playing the violin inside.”

“Excuse me, Madam, the cello performance is just about to start. Would you care to listen?”

It was fun.

It was a different kind of customer service than what we provided at Étranger, but I really liked this sort of thing. It energized me. I felt kind of like a crossing guard when I waved to some girls who looked like they were in junior high and they waved back at me. I always used to think that would be a nice job. A lot of them were women, but I remember thinking male crossing guards would probably be safer.

I sensed someone draw nearby while I was spacing out. Another chance to attract a customer. From the shoes, I assumed it was a man, so I called out almost reflexively, “Welcome home, Mast—”

I didn’t get a chance to finish the word—because when I wiped the sweat from my brow I realized who was standing in front of me.

The suit-clad man stopped dead in his tracks and looked at me in disbelief. *You and me both, buddy. I don’t believe this is happening, either.*

“...Why are you—?”

It was Richard.

He didn’t say a word, just looked at me completely dumbfounded.

The man who was well loved by the god of beauty wore a grey striped suit today. He had a white shirt on underneath, giving him a quintessential “businessman out doing business” vibe. It was a very reserved look, even if the person wearing it was a little too beautiful. It was Friday—one of the days he went out on business trips—but I guess he didn’t always go very far.

Just as I was thinking about how he looked beautiful as always, Richard finally spoke. I could already predict what he was going to say from the way he was looking at me.

“What on earth are you doing here?”

“Well, I’m a butler for the next three hours.”

“I have no idea what that’s supposed to mean.”

That’s my line.

Richard wasn’t the only one standing in front of me. There was a woman who had been walking just behind him. She had brown hair in a flashy perm, sharp

eyebrows, and shiny lips. She looked like a model who had walked right out of a fashion magazine. The only thing she carried was a white handbag, but it must have been a struggle for her to walk up the hill, since she was out of breath. I was surprised that they hadn't taken a taxi, considering Richard was with her.

I lowered my voice and whispered to Richard, "Sorry if I'm wrong about this, but is she your girlfriend?"

In response, I got "You absolute moron," shouted in my face point-blank. My ears were ringing. I apologized profusely.

I supposed the woman—who was asking what this place was—must be Richard's client for the day.

"Um, it's a little café-type thing put on by the college students in an orchestra music club. You can get some tea and snacks for 100 yen."

"Shall we take a break here?"

"...I'd love to. If I walk any farther, I think my heels might snap."

"Table for two!" I shouted back and was met with a chorus of "Welcome home!" from the club members. Honestly, it had more of the vibe of a bar than a maid café, but it was what it was. These were all college students with experience working part-time jobs, after all.

I sat Richard and the mysterious lady down at a table as far in the back as possible, one you couldn't see from the entrance. The woman's expression didn't lighten at all. She seemed more afraid than tense. I took stock of how they were doing, then went back outside. I couldn't help but worry about them, though, so I kept poking my head back in to check.

When the woman noticed me looking at her, she stood up and walked over to me.

"Hey, I have a favor to ask you."

"Uhh?"

"If a strange man comes by looking for someone, please tell him you have no clue who he could be talking about."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Oh no. This was straight out of a police drama. It was a chase! And to top it all off, Richard was involved. What on earth was happening? There were way too many possibilities to even begin narrowing it down. Everything was on the table, from British aristocrats fighting over an inheritance to an early afternoon lover's spat.

When the woman turned around and went back to the table, Richard looked like he was tagging along because he didn't really have a choice. What kind of client did that make her? Maybe they really were on the run from something together.

But then—

"Um, excuse me, has a beautiful woman come by here recently?!"

When I turned around, I saw a plump little man wearing a chain necklace. He was out of breath. He must have been running. His shirt looked like sweat would pour out if you wrung it. I asked him if he was all right, and he struggled to even answer.

Deciding to start by getting him some water, I went back into the café to fill a paper cup—but he just followed me in when I did. Before I realized he was following me, he shouted, "Ayame, babe!"

The sound of the violins instantly got quieter. I couldn't help imagining a garbage truck shooting past me as he rushed over to the table Richard and the woman were sitting at. The woman with the sharp eyebrows glared at me. *I'm so sorry.*

"Ayame, baby, I thought you were going to the salon? Why are you with a man? And who the hell is he? There's been a lot more foreigner-involved crime lately, you've got me worried."

"...I said I was going out alone, so why are you following me? Do I not have any right to privacy? Don't you have work you should be doing?"

"I was worried! What if you got into some kind of trouble!"

"Keep your voice down. This is a music café run by a bunch of college students. Use your indoor voice; don't cause them any trouble."

Everyone in the club was looking at Richard and the two of them, as if to say, “If you’re *really* concerned about not causing trouble, you should leave, not just talk quietly.” Only the beautiful jeweler seemed to take notice of this, but he just drank his water without reacting to it. He was currently in his typical the-customer-comes-first mode.

I decided to stick close to the table and keep an eye on things for now. I was pretty surprised by what had just happened, but the man who charged in just looked like an extremely normal thirty-year-old. Who was he to “Ayame, baby”?

I offered him some water, and he bowed and apologized.

“I’m being a bother, aren’t I? I’ll be gone before you know it. Ayame, honey, I just wanna know why you lied to me.”

“Hurry up and get back to work. Shouldn’t you be meeting someone in Harajuku right now?”

“I got a call that they pushed it back. So who is this guy? Does he even understand Japanese?”

“Oh, be quiet. I like the violin.”

I thought he would object, but he didn’t. He knocked back his cup of water in one big gulp without ever looking at me. The maids from the music club looked a little desperate as they started playing some sort of sad, dramatic piece. I could keenly feel how badly they wanted whatever was going on at that table to happen somewhere else. As for whether the two guests in question could feel it, too—I couldn’t say.

After keeping silent for a bit, he let out a little groan like he just remembered something and looked at me.

“I completely forgot to introduce myself! The name’s Itagaki.”

“O-oh. Seigi Nakata. Nice to meet you.”

Neither Richard nor Ayame said a word.

You weren’t really supposed to talk much at a café event like this, but if no one talked, they would probably never leave. I had to find a way to get the conversation moving. Richard looked a little exasperated when he realized I

wasn't leaving. *Don't look at me like this has nothing to do with me. I have eyes. I can read the room!*

I was pretty sure this Itagaki guy was Ayame's boyfriend, and that he'd assumed she was cheating on him with Richard. She was a glamorous beauty a bit out of Itagaki's league, which meant Itagaki probably had a hard time seeing his girlfriend walking around with such an attractive man. The situation really needed to be explained before things got even more messy.

I used every movement my eyebrows, eyelids, and eyeballs could manage to convey to Richard, "Could you tell him what you told me earlier, just, like, a little more politely?" But the jeweler's expression did not change. He just shook his head. *I see.* There must be a reason why he couldn't say anything. And he was silently pressuring me to not say anything, either. *Got it. I won't say a word.*

I wouldn't say anything about Richard being a jeweler or her being a client. But they *could* just be friends that happened to run into each other. I wanted to do as much as I could to back him up here.

I moved around to Mr. Itagaki's side and said, "Umm, so, Mr. Itagaki, I don't know what's going on here, but is there something I can help you with?"

"It's fine. Although, do you mind if I stay a little longer? I'll keep it down."

"S-sure..."

It sure didn't look like it was "fine." Ayame refused to even look at him. Richard, being Richard, seemed a bit concerned about Mr. Itagaki, but I made three rounds around the room before coming back, by which point the musicians had switched to a cheerful song. The three of them were still silent. The café event would be over in two hours. Were they going to continue this standoff out in the park afterward? It was so hot it was hard to believe it was early summer, but Richard was wearing a full suit. Surely just explaining that it was a misunderstanding would put an end to it?

"Um..."

When I showed up again, Richard stared daggers at me. But he looked tired. I knew he would be mad at me later, but I was going to have to keep pushing.

I addressed Ayame this time. "Please, just say something to Mr. Itagaki. I

know you and Richard aren't dating, but can't you at least tell him that?"

"Excuse me? Who are you?"

"Who am I? Well, I'm his—"

"Seigi."

My tongue froze in my mouth when I heard Richard's voice. His icy blue eyes told me not to say another word. But Mr. Itagaki seemed a little relieved. Good. If I were him, I'd know I wouldn't stand a chance against Richard. I guess that *had* been what he was most worried about, after all.

Mr. Itagaki smiled and thanked me before he began searching the pockets of his jeans like he suddenly remembered something again. He pulled out a leather card case and offered me a business card.

"Here's my card. Sorry for taking so long to introduce myself properly."

"What?!"

I was surprised to see he'd handed me a business card for a talent agency. I didn't know a lot about this stuff, but I was pretty sure I'd seen that agency name in the credits of some TV show once or twice. His full name was Toshiki Itagaki. And his title was manager.

So he wasn't her boyfriend?

"And this is Ayame Houjou, one of the clients I manage."

"Oh, stop it, he doesn't know anything about me."

"First of all, I need to make sure he isn't someone I should be concerned about. Do you know him? I'm relieved to hear they're not romantically involved. That would be bad for both Ayame and the company..."

Oh. Ohhh. I had it all wrong. So much for being able to read the room. My eyes may as well have been made of wood.

Richard shot me a look like "See? Told you so." *I am so sorry.*

Mr. Itagaki handed Richard a card, too, before straightening up and starting to speak.

"I won't insist on asking who you are, but I do have to ask what you've been

doing with my client. I don't intend to encroach on my client's privacy, but would you do me a favor and answer that much?"

Mr. Itagaki looked dead serious as he wiped the sweat from his brow. I'd seen many specimens of the creature known as the talent agency manager before, mostly back when I was working as a security guard at that TV station. They were men and women who worked long hours and always looked sleep-deprived, responsible for managing their clients' massive schedules and daily activities, all the while keeping an eye out for them—especially trying to ensure their company's precious talent weren't mistreated at the station. Managers typically managed more than just one client. It was normal for them to have to split their time between more than one. Which reminded me that Ayame had mentioned Itagaki was supposed to "meet someone in Harajuku" earlier. That someone was probably another client of his.

But were these two really just colleagues? I dunno... I might just have a suspicious mind, but I really didn't think he was acting when he frantically slipped past me earlier. Or maybe he had a reason to be particularly concerned for Ayame.

I was at a loss for what to do. Just then, I heard a woman say, "You're the worst."

It was Ayame. Urgh, I felt like I'd been strapped to a bed of needles to pay for my own misdeeds.

"Funny to see you acting like a manager now. I know you see me as deadweight."

"Of course I don't. I'm sorry, Ayame is currently busy with something other than her entertainment career."

"I'm just on sick leave. It's not that unusual. Leave me alone."

"But I'm worried about you."

"What, more of this nonsense about foreigners committing crimes? You're worried about me going out for the first time in ages and collapsing, aren't you? Well, don't worry, I'm just fine today. And this blond man here, you see, he just works at an accessory shop. I was shopping. That's all."

Ayame was curt, and her words a bit harsh, but she almost seemed a little out of breath by the end. It really didn't seem like she was doing "just fine." Mr. Itagaki's gaze flitted about, looking first at me and then at Richard again.

The beautiful jeweler seemed to have resolved not to say a word.

A bit later, Mr. Itagaki posed a question to Ayame. "...Fine. But I want you to tell me one thing: Why did you run when you saw me?"

That's right, she and Richard ran all the way here.

Ayame went silent again. This was putting me in a rough spot, too.

"....."

This was just something I'd heard rumors about at the TV station, but apparently, romance between managers and clients was strictly forbidden.

I guess it made sense once you thought about it. The agency's talent was essentially their product, and part of what they sold was the fantasy of being able to romance them. It'd be hard to do that with someone interfering internally. On the off chance such a relationship *did* develop, the manager would be removed and assigned to another client before the media found out about it. That was just how it was.

Whatever conversation was going on went in one ear and right out the other while I was lost in thought.

"Um...I know this is probably none of my business, but can you manage someone you're in a relationship with?"

"Huh? Oh, well, we're in a bit of an unusual situation. It's normally out of the question, but it does happen sometimes. Are you hoping to get into the entertainment industry?"

"No, I want a government job..."

"Wow, stability, huh?"

"I guess there are kids these days who value that," Mr. Itagaki giggled like a child.

He seemed like a nice enough guy, if not the most dependable person out

there—though he did seem to have switched tracks pretty well once he moved into professional mode. Ayame was tapping her heels to the sound of the piano. Abruptly, she stopped and clicked her tongue.

“...I quit.”

“Huh?”

“I quit. I struggled to make the decision, but once I did, it was easy. I quit. Tell your boss.”

“Ayame, baby, this isn’t the place to be making decisions like that. You need to be rational.”

“I’ve been thinking about it for ages.”

Their slightly raised voices chilled the air in the café again. There was no way I was going to be able to move them once they got going again. I looked at Richard, asking him what to do with my eyes. He remained silent, but I could see hesitation in his gaze. He was clearly struggling to figure out what to do next, just like I was.

Ayame must have taken offense to my expression or something, because she looked at me next. “I don’t know how you’re related to him, but let me give you the short version of my situation. I’m a performer, Ayame Hyoujou. For certain reasons, I’ve been taking a break from work since last summer. You see, I may be a performer, but I became too scared to go out in public. I couldn’t work anymore. It was so bad that I hated the idea of even leaving the house. The president of my agency is a rather kind person, so he extended my contract another year, but that year is just about up and I need to decide if I’m staying or leaving. And right now, I’ve decided to quit. That’s all. All right? I’m going home.”

“Oh, come on, please, Ayame, babe.”

Ayame knocked his hand away like she’d anticipated it was coming, stood up, and opened her handbag. She pulled out a box. A jewelry box. It was about the right size for a ring or a small brooch. It wasn’t the style Étranger used for customer purchases, so she must have gotten it from another shop. I didn’t know what was inside, but Mr. Itagaki’s expression changed, like he recognized

it.

“You can have this back, too.”

“...Hey, I can’t take that back now.”

“Take it.”

“Let’s talk. Just a little, okay?”

Seemingly pacified by Mr. Itagaki’s plea, she sat back down. I could hear the club members, who were watching from a distance, sigh. That said, I was grateful for the fact that they were speaking more quietly than before. The guests at the table next to them had left, but the table of three women in the corner were chatting the whole time, apparently oblivious to what was going on over here. I may have just been a last-minute replacement, but as a member of the café staff, I was glad they were still enjoying themselves.

She tossed the jewelry box on the square table, its lid still closed.

“...What? You want me to work that badly? Let me guess, you want to convince me to work my poison tongue again, so I’ll get mountains of hate mail. I may have been born with a talent for insults and sarcasm, but that doesn’t mean I’m immune to cruelty.”

“Of course not. I don’t know how many times I’ve told you this, but all I want is for you to walk the path *you* desire, Ayame. I know you have incredible talents that no one else does, and I want you to use those talents to make all sorts of people happy. But—”

“I wish you’d stop telling someone who’s burnt out to ‘choose your own path,’ and all that nonsense. I feel like I’m cursed.”

Mr. Itagaki looked pained.

“...I can’t trust you.”

“Ayame, I—”

“I know you care about me. That much I can trust. But I can’t believe a man who praises me as easily as he breathes when he says he thinks I can do something. What am I to you anyway? A living painting?”

Richard suddenly started to cough. Was he okay? I guess his water went down the wrong pipe. Ayame and Mr. Itagaki seemed entirely unconcerned, so I went over to Richard to ask if I could bring him anything. He waved me off as if to tell me not to worry about him. I guess he was fine.

Ayame seemed to notice my quiet panic. Her shiny lips stretched in a smile as she turned to address me.

“You know, this guy’s really funny. Here I am, the most stereotypical example of a talent dating her manager—and here he is, claiming he has faith in my talent nonetheless. It’s unacceptable from the agency’s perspective, of course, but I’m not working right now, so they’re turning a blind eye. It won’t really be a problem until I come back. Even the president seems a little hesitant to do anything that might worsen the condition of someone who’s currently on medical leave. Meanwhile, this guy keeps carving time out of his work day to check on me. And this is the ring he gave me a year ago, when I decided to take a break from work.”

She opened the jewelry box. Inside was a gold ring with a design that didn’t really look particularly special, compared to Ayame herself. There was a large blue stone set in it. I didn’t think I’d seen this shade of blue very often. It made me wonder what the stone could be. Its sheen made me think of garnet, but it was a smoky blue, like flowers growing on a mountainside. There weren’t any blue garnets, as far as I knew, though. Which meant...

“Blue spinel,” a voice more beautiful than the violins playing in the background said right next to me. It was Richard. I guess he’d decided it was okay to at least say the name of the stone, since he was introduced as someone selling accessories.

Ayame nodded.

“No one talks about ‘red rubies,’ so I wondered why you had to go out of your way to call it ‘blue’ spinel...but it seems most people associate spinel with red, so you have to specify if it’s another color. Oh yes, and the name *spinel* means ‘spine.’ Did you know that, dearest manager?”

“...No, I didn’t. I just thought it suited you.”

“Well, maybe it does suit a woman with a poison tongue,” Ayame said. Mr.

Itagaki seemed to shrink as he heard her say that. “But that’s not all. I looked it up, and it seems spinel is known as a stone that can ‘become anything.’ It’s often mistaken for ruby, sapphire, or even black diamond. But in reality, it’s just spinel. Perfect for a performer like me, who couldn’t find a place in the entertainment industry.”

“Ayame, honey, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Oh, I know you didn’t. I just have a lot of free time, seeing as I can’t really do anything, and happened upon this little piece of trivia while researching gemstones. They’re just the idle ramblings of a person with too much time on their hands. I am well aware of the fact that you wouldn’t give me a stone with that in mind.”

That was a bit of a relief. As cold as they were being now, I could tell there was some affection between the two of them. But Ayame seemed to be attacking Mr. Itagaki despite knowing that. It would be an oversimplification to say she was just lashing out like a child—she really seemed to be in pain. I didn’t know what kind of illness she had, but was it really a good idea for someone who struggled to be around people this much to hang out in a café? I supposed it *was* a lot calmer than a fast-food joint in front of the station at least.

But that wasn’t all that was bothering me. She’d said her relationship with him wasn’t a problem as long as she didn’t go back to work—which meant that it *would* be a problem if she did go back. I doubted they’d force them to break up, but she might end up with another manager. Mr. Itagaki seemed to want Ayame to come back to work, so maybe he was okay with the idea?

Mr. Itagaki seemed pained by the whole situation, while Ayame had this kind of scornful sneer on her face. She wasn’t laughing at him but rather mocking herself. It was an awful expression.

“I don’t think there are a lot of men out there who’d say they don’t care if I can work or not, they just love me and want to be by my side. Surely you won’t mind if I complain a bit about how that isn’t all sunshine and rainbows?”

She didn’t even wait for an “uh-huh” from me before continuing.

“I’m not working right now. He shouldn’t care if I look particularly gorgeous or whatever. But every time he sees me, he won’t stop praising every little detail.

Not many people are capable of spouting such insincere drivel day in and day out.”

“Uh, so he, uh, praises you?”

“When he says it to my face, it’s just the trite nonsense you’d expect from a boyfriend. But it *is* a little ridiculous. He says I’m beautiful, that I invigorate him, that he just wants to be near me, that I heal him, or that being with me is like a dream and whatnot.”

I felt like I was about to go into cardiac arrest. I’d obviously never experienced a medical event that serious before, but it had to feel like a squeezing pain in your chest, right? That was how I felt in that moment. Mr. Itagaki looked like he wanted to run away, and I did, too.

“Now, I know all too well that you mean no harm, but I wish you’d stop asking me to have faith in myself while simultaneously showering me with false flattery. Compliments are like government bonds. The more excessively you deploy them, the less they’re worth. And if you think that a compliment can’t cut as deeply as an insult, you’re terribly naive.”

I felt like I’d been sent flying by a body blow.

Ayame seemed surprised to see me look so squashed, not Mr. Itagaki. She stared at me like she was wondering what was wrong. I must have gone pale as a sheet. I did have at least *some* self-awareness, after all.

Compliments lost their credibility when they were overused. They could even become barbed with spines.

Richard had said he didn’t mind, and that he knew I enjoyed complimenting him. When he told me to compliment him all I liked, he’d had a cheerful expression on his face—so cheerful, in fact, that it made me happy, too. But... still...

I gave Richard a pleading look. He responded with a conspicuous sigh and then mouthed something to me. It was short, but it wasn’t “You absolute moron.” It was “It’s too late.”

Too late to reflect on my actions? No, he was smiling slightly. Too late to still be worrying about that, probably. I was so glad he felt that way that I almost

cried.

But it made me realize something.

There was a 10,000 percent chance that it would be better for me to *not* do what I was going to do next, but I had a killer strategy that could fix this situation. And I was the only one who could execute it.

Richard, looking at me, noticed the unsettled expression creeping over my face. He seemed to be trying to figure out what I was thinking. *I'm just thinking. Thinking about doing something.* Richard gave me a frustrated look, but he wasn't scolding me or telling me to stop.

So I guess I just have to do it.

"Hey, Richard."

"...What?"

He dragged out his reply, but it seemed that my boss was going to play along with my gambit. Thankfully. Anyway, better get on with it.

"I wonder if I've been doing something awful to you, day in and day out."

"Whatever do you mean, Seigi?"

He enunciated very clearly, like we'd arranged the whole thing in advance. I sounded like a talking robot, but Richard was giving his own deliberately wooden performance. Ayame looked a little confused, but not suspicious, and Mr. Itagaki had never even seen Richard speak before. *All right, let's keep going.*

"Richard, I'm so sorry for always complimenting you about how beautiful you are."

"It's fine. I don't mind."

"I'm sorry for saying that you're like the sky at dawn, or summer leaves, or diamond dust."

"As I said, I don't mind."

Both Ayame and Mr. Itagaki were startled. Good, it looked like they both bought it. I had faith that Richard would be able to take charge once I got the ball rolling, so I just had to do what I could. For both Mr. Itagaki and Ayame.

“You see, I have a hard time restraining myself, so the words just kinda slip out of my mouth whenever I find myself thinking about how beautiful you are. But now that I think about it, it must not feel very good to be complimented like that all the time, huh?”

“It isn’t as if you are offering those compliments in an attempt to flatter me. I can be sure of that much, at least.”

I spoke without looking Richard in the eye. Awkward as it was, I couldn’t bring myself to make eye contact while talking about this particular topic. It was just too embarrassing. In fact, it was a matter of life or death to me.

“...But even if you get used to something you dislike, you still dislike it, right?”

I apologized again. Richard looked right at me. He really was shockingly beautiful. But this was not the right time to compliment him on it!

“I’m not sure if that’s true. Cloying flattery displeases me—people telling me my face must be as effective as a billboard in attracting customers, for instance, or assuming I use it to my advantage to do just that. And it is true that compliments on my appearance, irrespective of intent, once felt like the nagging sticky sensation of gum on the sole of your shoe with every step. But you are different. Your words are different. When your words brush my face, it’s like a playful wind. With your absurd vocabulary, you are expressly telling me that my appearance brings you joy. It does feel a bit peculiar at times, but perhaps I find that peculiarity oddly endearing, Seigi.”

And then he smiled.

I was struck dumb for a while. He’d enunciated every syllable with care to make it easy to understand, like Professor Richard giving a Japanese lesson, but the contents of his words seemed sincere and without artifice. It was like he was saying all my thoughtless remarks were okay. I hadn’t expected to be told something like that in the middle of our little charade, so my heart was pounding out of my chest. But Richard was beautiful regardless, and beautiful things put my heart at ease. I wasn’t what mattered now—but Ayame and Mr. Itagaki were.

Mr. Itagaki was stunned for a moment. Then he looked me in the eye, suddenly snapping out of it.

“I thought you were a college student working at this café, but you know him? What on earth...?”

“I *am* a college student working at this café, but I also work part-time for him. We just happened to run into each other here by coincidence.”

“Oh...I see... Haa...”

“It seems this college student of yours is a master of excessive compliments, too, Richard.”

That was the first time Ayame had said Richard’s name. My boss simply responded, “Well, yes.” He was cloaked in his usual aura of calm elegance, but I could see a hint of strain in his eyes, probably due to being forced to say something he hadn’t really wanted to. *I’m sorry, but nothing I said was a lie, so please just let me off for now.*

Ayame had a teasing smile on her face.

“Don’t you get fed up with being pummeled by words like that?”

“To be honest, it does get exhausting. It feels like I’m being told that I need to look perfect at all times, and that can be a bit frustrating.”

“See?”

Ayame turned to Mr. Itagaki. She wasn’t being smug or triumphant, and she didn’t seem to be attempting to use Richard against him. The look she was giving her manager/boyfriend said, “Do you get it now?”

Mr. Itagaki glanced at me, as if he wanted help. Huh? I didn’t think this far. What do I do?

Before I lost my cool, Richard continued. “However.”

“Words, be they criticism or praise, are imprecise tools unable to convey the totality of a person’s intentions. Just like icebergs floating on the sea, they conceal a great deal below the surface. Words represent mere fragments of moments of ever-changing emotion. Thankfully, he and I have spent a great deal of time together, and it has become easier than before for me to generally understand what he is thinking. It is easy for me to imagine the rest of the iceberg hidden beneath the waves when speaking to someone I know so well.

And so, even if it may wear on me a bit at times, I am able to brush that feeling off rather easily.”

Oh, come on. A “great deal of time”? It’s barely been a year. But despite that thought, I knew better than to correct him. Should I try to act like we’d known each other for decades? I felt a bit like I was trying to pull some kind of con, but Ayame’s expression softened, and I decided it was for the best that I just keep my mouth shut.

“...Then I guess it’s the person on the receiving end’s problem if they can’t believe a word the other person says.”

“I think it’s an issue of mutual trust. When I feel like he’s crossed a line, I say what I need to say and have faith that he won’t be upset by that.”

The thing that bothered Ayame the most was that Mr. Itagaki’s praise sounded false to her. Obviously, it would hurt to feel like the person you love didn’t really feel the same way about you. But I had no idea what to say to someone like that. While I was wrestling with my thoughts, Mr. Itagaki picked up where Richard left off.

“Thank you very much. I think the way you two handle things will be a useful point of reference. You really are good at Japanese, aren’t you? Also, Ayame, honey, I have something I need to tell you: I’m sorry. I was trying to support you, not upset you. But I kept saying the same sorts of things to you and that must not have felt good. I’m sorry.”

“...It kind of pisses me off how you apologize so quickly, too.”

“You really are difficult. I’m not sure how to respond to that.”

Mr. Itagaki smiled, like he didn’t feel like he’d actually done anything wrong. I wouldn’t know what to do, either, in his place. Even if someone told me not to compliment them, the words would just spill out of my mouth. I’d make an effort if someone told me to be quiet, but given how prone I was to slipping up, it’d be pretty hard to keep everything in. If Richard wasn’t the person he was now, he would’ve probably fired me ages ago.

Ayame waited a beat before mumbling, “You don’t need to respond. Just give me some space until the irritation passes. Then you can come back. I think I’ll be

back to normal then, too.”

“Oh, I see,” Mr. Itagaki said. Ayame didn’t respond.

Mr. Itagaki said he’d try to do that. There was a certain tenderness that passed between them, though it pained me to also see flickers of the various communication-related scars the two of them had accumulated.

Ayame was quiet for a moment. “...You were saying you’re confident I can start working again, right?”

“Yeah. Because I believe it.”

“Now hypothetically, if I don’t quit, I won’t be able to see you very often, will I? Think about it objectively. You think I’ll be able to work again if I’m assigned to a different manager?”

“I think it would go great. You’re very driven. And, sure, maybe we won’t be able to see each other as much, but it’s not like we’ll *never* be able to see each other again.”

Ayame went silent. *Oh, I get it now.* She was happy to hear he thought she was good at her job, but at the same time, not happy to hear him effectively saying that he didn’t mind if they weren’t together all the time. But this was a work issue for them. If things went poorly, they could both lose their jobs. I was sure Ayame wanted to avoid that—but she also didn’t want to be reminded of it again and again.

They’d been a couple for a year now, right? Mr. Itagaki had to be aware of this. So why did he keep trying to tell her she could do it?

Ayame smiled slightly, then mumbled, “For some reason, the more you compliment me, the more it seems like you’d do it in response to just about anything. I have a hard time understanding the nature of your love for me. It’d be a great help if you could give me a rundown, as if you were briefing me for a job. If you can manage that.”

She turned away from him. The ball was now in Mr. Itagaki’s court. I looked at him, trying to cheer him on. It seemed like a critical moment in their relationship.

But Mr. Itagaki had the same, soft smile on his face that he had the whole time. He wiped his sweaty hands on his flannel shirt.

“I love you with all my heart and soul, Ayame. And if my compliments seem haphazard, well, I’ve always been the kind of person to say the first thing that comes to mind. Marrying you and starting a family would make me incredibly happy, but what would make me even happier is seeing you smiling and enjoying yourself like you did a year ago. And I think you sparkle your brightest when you’re doing your job. It has nothing to do with whether you’re slinging insults or not. I just think you’re really incredible whenever you’re talking and laughing with your guests. As a manager, I can see what’s going on behind the scenes, so I don’t want to mindlessly encourage you, but I also don’t want to act like I understand everything you’re struggling with. I mean, it’s ultimately your life. I feel like it would be unfair of me to drag your talent toward me just because I love you or we’re dating or anything like that. If you have even the slightest inclination to return to the entertainment industry, but are giving up on what you want for some other reason, I desperately want to tell you not to do that. No matter the reason. Because I’m your fan. But maybe...that’s the wrong way to love someone...”

Despite what he said, Mr. Itagaki certainly didn’t look like he believed there was anything wrong with it. But he seemed prepared to come up with something else if Ayame was displeased. At least, it seemed that way to me.

My first thought was, *I guess he really is an adult*. It wasn’t easy to change yourself to suit someone else because you wanted them to pick you. Every time I started to grow frustrated while researching job options, I felt like it was something I could never do—even though I knew I *had* to do it.

Mr. Itagaki looked at the spinel ring and touched it regretfully.

“I don’t want you to return this to me. If you don’t like the stone, we’ll go to a real jewelry store, not an accessory shop, and get a new one set in it, or even get a new ring. I wouldn’t even mind if you just put it away somewhere. Just don’t give it back to me.”

“That was a little long for a briefing, don’t you think?”

“I guess you’re right,” Mr. Itagaki said with a smile. Ayame was smiling, too. I

exchanged a quick glance with Richard. I was thinking that Ayame wouldn't get mad if he introduced himself now, but I had to stop looking at his face. He was just too beautiful. He was in his Ginza store mode—he'd shifted into his Richard the Jeweler gear.

I looked away and, a second later, heard his graceful voice address Mr. Itagaki.

"Mr. Itagaki, I feel a bit hesitant to ask this without having so much as introduced myself, but why is it that you selected a spinel ring as a gift for her?"

"Huh? Well..." He trailed off, saying so quietly that I was pretty sure only I heard him, "because that's what they were selling."

Ayame's lack of reaction was probably because she hadn't heard him. Or she was just pretending she didn't. I didn't even care if it was something he came up with after the fact, I just wanted him to have some kind of reason. I mean, if you took that train of thought to its logical extreme, you could probably argue that was true of *all* gifts. You didn't need a concrete reason to want to give a particular thing to someone. It all came down to one question: Would it make them happy?

Mr. Itagaki hesitated for a bit before he started to speak again.

"...Honestly, I don't know the first thing about gemstones...but I knew Ayame's ring size from her file at the agency, and I knew she liked blue, so when I saw that ring on the first floor of a department store when they were having an event, I thought it might be nice. Ayame's very fussy about her clothes, and she doesn't wear accessories other than earrings and necklaces very often, but I figured this color would fit with most of the clothes she wears. And the blue color is so clear and refreshing—it's beautiful, isn't it? I knew she was going through a lot, so I thought that maybe if she had something like this, it might ease her sorrows a bit...but I guess spinel wasn't a very good choice for Ayame."

Richard didn't say a word, but just looked at Ayame. She was still looking away. The beautiful jeweler smiled faintly and returned his gaze to Mr. Itagaki.

"I think it is actually quite unusual for someone to put quite so much thought into selecting a stone as a gift."

“Really? But I mean, aren’t rings something you should put a lot of thought into?”

“Perhaps, but ‘a lot’ can mean something very different from person to person. While many people come in wanting the recipient’s birthday stone, there are just as many who just order the most expensive thing, not to mention the exact opposite—those looking for something that fits within their budget. But you, meanwhile, thoroughly considered your choice from the recipient’s perspective.”

I understood what Richard was trying to say. It *was* unusual how Mr. Itagaki’s criteria for assessing the gift were entirely focused on Ayame’s desires. No matter how they went about it, when a person bought a gift for another, that gift would always be colored by the giver’s intentions. Whether intentionally or otherwise, gifts were always shaded by some degree of the giver’s desire to make the recipient feel a certain way about them. That wasn’t even a bad thing—I was sure plenty of people would love to receive a gift like that. Maybe even Ayame.

But the spinel Mr. Itagaki bought wasn’t *colored* in that way.

He’d explained that he looked for something that would suit her best, and found it—nothing more, nothing less. It really wasn’t all that extravagant, depending on how you thought about it. That’s what Richard was saying.

Richard continued talking in his usual businesslike manner. He still hadn’t introduced himself as a jeweler, but I didn’t think he needed to show a business card at that point. It was plain to see.

“You were correct about the origin of spinel’s name. It comes from the Latin *spinella*, meaning ‘spine,’ but the stone was named that way for its tendency to form pointed, octahedral crystals, rather than some folk tradition associating it with ‘prickliness.’ Spinel does also have a history of being improperly identified. In the past, when technology to assess and identify gemstones was not so advanced, we had cases like the Black Prince’s Ruby, and it has been mistaken for sapphire or even rare colors of diamond at times. But that is fundamentally a human failing. Now, in the twenty-first century, it’s just as scarce as ruby. It’s a stone I fully expect to rise in value in the future.”

“Really? I didn’t know any of that.”

Mr. Itagaki looked surprised, but Richard gently shook his head. “You knew better than anyone, actually.”

“Huh? I mean, I really didn’t know anything you just told me.”

“No, I’m not referring to the trivia about the stone, but its essence.”

Its essence? I wondered what he meant by that. I hadn’t expected the conversation to take this turn.

The beautiful jeweler softly spun his words.

“No matter the stone, so long as there exist humans who cherish it for its beauty, it becomes a gemstone. But beauty, fondness, and brilliance are all things that exist only in the hearts of each individual. If you look at stones from an investment perspective, it’s an entirely different conversation.” He added, voice gentle: “The stone *becomes* a gem because you view it as such.”

It felt like time had stopped.

Both Richard and Saul had said that beauty was the essence of gemstones before. It was really pretty crazy, once you thought about it—I mean, if you kept going with that logic, *everything* would be subjective. It’s a vague yet powerful word, because it meant that as long as you found it beautiful, you could say with confidence that it was a valuable gemstone.

Mr. Itagaki looked like he was deep in thought for a moment.

“...I guess it’s not all that different from a manager and the talent they work with, huh? Or maybe like romantic attachment, too. I hate to put it this way, but it’s like that old saying—when in love, even pockmarks look like dimples.”

“Perhaps you could say the opposite is true as well.”

That no matter how useful something might be, if you didn’t believe in it, it was no better than trash.

I was painfully familiar with that one. Whenever the upperclassmen talked about the interviews they were getting, I’d feel a sort of twisted emotion brewing within me. But, I mean, what else did I expect? We all knew from the start that we were playing a game of musical chairs. But we were still going for

it, all the while honing our skills. We still believed that we'd find the right chair someday, or at least *a* chair to sit in, even if it wasn't the right one.

Richard glanced at me. He knew what I was thinking.

"In Japanese, the world that we inhabit, the world of the living, is called the *ukiyo*—the floating world—but it's also sometimes written with the first character of melancholy instead, rendering it 'the sad world.' It is a timeless truth that things do not always go as we hope. But perhaps that is precisely why spinel is said to have the rather brilliant meaning of 'inner perfection.'"

"Inner perfection?" Mr. Itagaki replied.

Richard could pull people in so completely—even people who didn't know the first thing about gemstones. His true calling must've really been either jeweler or con man.

"It is also said to be a stone that fosters the willpower to forge one's own path, regardless of what others say. I think you made an excellent choice."

Mr. Itagaki seemed a little bewildered by Richard's warm words, but he bowed and thanked him. A few moments later, he hesitantly spoke to Ayame.

"Now, I'm just guessing here, but he's not from some accessory shop, is he? Is he a jeweler? Or some kind of geology professor...?"

"Ugh, I really didn't want to have to say it."

"Uh, huh?"

Ayame raised her voice, annoyed. After making all three men in her company exceedingly tense, she shot Mr. Itagaki a glare.

"It's my finger."

"Huh? What about your finger?"

"...I put on weight. The ring doesn't fit on my finger anymore."

Mr. Itagaki was confused at first. Then he caught up—"Ohh."—and nodded. I felt the same way. I guess she was placing an order to have the ring resized?

It was like a dam had suddenly broken. Ayame began drumming her fingers on the table as she spoke.

“This man is a jeweler who runs a jewelry shop in Ginza, and I was looking for advice on getting the ring resized. I was scared to go to Ginza because of how busy it is, but the woman who runs my favorite salon told me that if I paid extra, Richard would come to me. So that’s what I did, but you just had to follow me...ugh!”

Ayame just kept groaning. I wanted to groan about how this thing was still going myself, but Mr. Itagaki endured. He must’ve been used to this, and I could see a hint of a smile in Ayame’s eyes as she fumed. Maybe it wasn’t as bad as it seemed.

“...I wasn’t sure what to do: Go on a diet or have the ring resized?”

“What? Just get the ring resized.”

“Keeping your weight under control is part of being in the entertainment industry, isn’t it? I’m almost out of time to make my decision, right?”

Mr. Itagaki’s face lit up for a moment before he wiped the expression from his face. There was just something refreshing about him—the man who said he felt that trying to lead someone down the path you desired, even if out of love, was cowardly.

“I see. So, did you decide to resize it in the end?”

“That’s what I wanted advice about. The salon owner told me that this particular jeweler would absolutely keep my confidence, no matter what I talked to him about...”

She’d decided to hold off on making the decision and called Étranger to make an appointment to meet Richard at a shop in front of a station near her home. As luck would have it, Mr. Itagaki saw them, and the two of them made a run for it before they had concluded their business. It was quite the disaster.

Ayame apologized profusely, and Richard shook his head. He was so good at maintaining his professional face in times like these.

“Sure, I didn’t have to run. But I didn’t want anyone to know I’ve gotten fat. Especially you.”

“Why, though? All humans have weight fluctuations through the course of

their lives.”

“That’s not something a manager should say.”

“But if you really intend on quitting, I don’t think you need to worry about your weight.”

Exactly.

Deep in her heart, Ayame wanted to come back to work after all. I thought that was the right call, too. As I listened to her talk, I’d realized that what initially sounded like her being out of breath was actually a deliberate, staccato rhythm to her speech. But more importantly, I realized that her face shone five times brighter whenever she was talking. She had a mysterious charm to her. I had no idea if she was what the entertainment industry wanted, but like Mr. Itagaki said, I was pretty sure someone like her had the ability to encourage other people when they needed it.

Ayame shot me a critical glare for my scrutiny, then flashed a vaguely childish smile and turned to Richard.

“Um, would you mind taking a rain check on that ring resizing? I think I’m going to try a diet first.”

“Ayame, honey.”

“What’s the problem? I hate the idea of just slowly turning into a fat blob. I don’t know if losing weight will bring me ‘inner perfection,’ but I’m sure a ring like that will keep me going.”

“Well, I just want you to know there has been a lot more diversity in body type in the industry lately, and I would love you even if you put on a hundred kilos, so don’t overdo it.”

“Oh, be quiet. Don’t invite me out for barbecue for a while.”

There were no barbs to Ayame’s words there. Mr. Itagaki checked his wristwatch like he’d suddenly remembered something, let out a little “all right,” and promptly stood up.

“Okay. Well, I have to get to the studio, or I won’t make it for my next appointment.”

“I know that, now get going already.”

“I’ll stop by again tomorrow afternoon, probably. Sorry for the trouble. If you’ll excuse me.”

Ayame watched her manager leave with a professional look on her face before her sharply defined eyebrows began to twitch up and down.

“That was quite the scene, wasn’t it? I am so sorry, Richard. And I should apologize to you, too, part-timer.”

Before I could say that it wasn’t a big deal to me, Richard cut in. “If anyone should apologize, it’s me. I am sincerely sorry for being the cause of this scene.”

I panicked and bowed my head, too. That’s right—since I’d introduced myself as Richard’s employee, I wasn’t just a college student anymore, but representing *Étranger*. I was at least obligated to lower my head when apologies were flying.

Ayame chuckled, a slightly bitter look on her face. “Well, it’s my fault for not being able to make up my mind about what to do with myself in the first place. But I did enjoy myself. It’s been ages since I last got to hear a stranger boast about their partner like that.”

Wait, when did anything of the sort happen? Richard had an indecipherable look to him as he explained with a smile that she had gotten the wrong impression. Ayame stood up, took her sunglasses from her bag, and put them on.

“I know I’m not the most recognizable person in the first place, but I think wearing these home will make me feel a bit better. Maybe I *can* be a celebrity again.”

“Would you like me to see you to the station?”

“No need. It’ll be a nice hike.”

Ayame smirked. Just as I thought she was about to stride off, she stopped in front of me and leaned over. Huh? What?

“I have a question for you. You see, I’m no good at complimenting people. What’s the trick?”

Trick to complimenting people? Did such a thing exist? And was I really that good at it? Thinking back over my life thus far, I couldn't remember ever being complimented on such a skill. People *did* call me thoughtless or tell me they had no idea what I was talking about sometimes, but maybe only people with very good listening skills could accept such strong compliments? Like Richard, for example.

"Oh, well, um...I don't really think I'm very good at it, either, but when it comes to Richard, specifically, the words just keep coming... I guess it depends on the person in question?"

"Seigi."

"Sorry."

Ayame smiled, sunglasses still firmly planted on her face. This time, she did leave the café. I let out a sigh, relieved I could finally go back to doing my job.

I got up from my seat, too. At times like this, I'd like to serve Richard some royal milk tea, but I couldn't do that here.

"Richard, would you like some more water? All we really have for food here is cookies, though."

"Sit down."

"Huh?"

"Sit right back down. Right there," he repeated, in a low tone that clearly brooked no opposition.

I didn't understand. Wasn't everything resolved? Nonetheless, I sat down as I was told, right in the seat Ayame had been sitting in. Richard was glaring daggers at me. It seemed he was out of business mode.

"Let me ask you one more time: What on earth are you doing here?"

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

"I asked you what you're doing here. I thought you were impossibly strapped for time? If your part-time wages are so insufficient that you're taking another job, I wish you would have said something. As your employer, I demand an explanation."

“You’ve got it all wrong. That’s not why I’m here.”

“Oh, so you’ve uncharacteristically squandered all your money? Deplorable.”

Richard shook his head. It was a beautiful gesture, but he really had the wrong idea. I explained that I’d been recruited as a replacement for a friend in my exam prep class at this music café. I was just a standin. Last minute help for a friend. This wasn’t a regular thing, and no money was exchanging hands. My friend had been helping me study for the civil service exam, and I just couldn’t turn him down when he asked me for a favor. I just couldn’t say no.

I didn’t think I’d done anything that deserved such a scolding.

Richard stared at me for a moment before letting out a sigh. “...Absolutely deplorable.”

“What is? It was just a three-hour obligation, and I figured it’d be a nice change of pace—no drawbacks there. Plus, I got to see you today.”

He told me to be quiet, and I replied with an obedient “Yes, sir.” Technically, I wasn’t working at *Étranger* at the moment. I probably should have kicked Richard out to help the club, but given how much time I’d already wasted, another five or ten minutes would hardly make a difference. Obviously, I was going to thoroughly apologize afterward.

“It’s a little late to say this now, but agreeing to do favors without understanding what you’re getting into is a recipe for disaster.”

“I’m pretty sure the recipe for disaster in this case was *you*. Does stuff like that happen a lot?”

“You mean getting dragged into a messy situation with a client outside the shop? I can’t say it never happens. And I have been mistaken for a homewrecker more than once.”

“Must be rough...”

“I’m used to it.”

So, she’d been talking to Richard about getting her ring resized. It didn’t seem like a big deal to me, but I supposed it could be a delicate subject to some. Especially for people working in a field where their height and weight were

public knowledge.

Ayame had said she wanted to discuss whether to have it resized, but it seemed like she'd pretty much made up her mind the moment she called a jeweler. Maybe she really did want to retire from the entertainment industry after all. I couldn't say if Mr. Itagaki's thoughts on the matter were right or not, but they definitely were sincere, in that he didn't want to force her to do what *he* wanted. Because he couldn't take responsibility for what might happen, and because it was her life.

But even without that level of consideration, I thought everyone tended to pick what they liked. Romantic partners were probably the epitome of that.

It was a happy thing to have the person you loved believe in your potential, but it also came with a lot of pressure. I knew this was a weird thing to say, but if I were Ayame, I'd probably look for another boyfriend. Someone I could laugh with about quitting the entertainment industry—someone who had no connection to who I'd been in the past. But she didn't do that. She went out with that spinel ring, even though she didn't like going outside. Because she wanted to get it resized. So it probably wasn't just Mr. Itagaki that she loved but her own potential, which he loved and believed in, too.

Ayame's decision seemed like a noble one to me. Making a second attempt at something again after you encountered a setback was painful in a different way from trying something you'd never done before. But she decided to do it nonetheless.

"It's a good thing she decided not to have the ring resized, huh?"

"Personally, I'd like to object to the entertainment industry's obsession with thinness, but if that's what she wants to do, I can only respect her decision. Now, I had better get going. I have another appointment to get to. On that note —"

Richard was about to get up when I said, "You know, you made me really happy earlier. Thank you."

"...Excuse me?"

"A playful wind," I said, swiping my hand in front of my face. I wasn't sure if I

had effectively conveyed the image of wind with that gesture, admittedly. Only half of Richard's face slightly contorted as he gave me a stiff "ha-ha." I felt a chill sink deep into my bones. It's a good thing he hadn't chosen acting as a career. He'd probably be swimming in fans willing to throw away their life savings to support him. Even this icy expression of contempt had intense power.

"I was simply playing along for the sake of my customer."

"O-of course you were. Sorry."

"But I can't say none of it was true."

Having smoothly dodged the issue, Richard rose from his chair and stared intently down at me.

"At any rate, it's an issue of mutual trust. I trust you. However, I am not fond of the notion that I make you anxious all the time. We'll have to have a long talk when we get the chance."

"I can't wait."

I was sure I was in for a stern lecture, accompanied by delicious sweets—a perfect combination of heaven and hell. But I actually liked getting scolded by Richard. I'd sound completely unrepentant if I told him that, but it really did make me happy. It was like having a real older brother.

When I waved to him as he turned back briefly and smiled just a bit, I noticed something.

No one was playing the violin. And there were no other customers in the café, either.

A man with glasses was standing by the entrance when Richard left. It was Takezawa. When I saw his face twitch, I realized what a dumb expression I wore.

"Hey, Takezawa! You came. Sorry for all the trouble. Someone from my job came by earlier and—I hope it was all right. I'm sorry for causing trouble."

"It's really not all right at all. It's already about time to get the room cleaned up," Takezawa mumbled.

Three hours had passed before I even realized it. The café event was over. I

don't think I'd made a very good butler.

I apologized again for failing him after he'd come to me for help. Takezawa brushed it off, saying it was fine, but hesitated to continue for a moment. I wondered what it was.

"So, um...that, uh...how do I put this, um..."

"You're talking about that blond guy who's as beautiful as a snow sprite, right? He's my boss at my part-time job. He's a nice guy, but he got into a bit of a mess with one of his customers."

"...A snow sprite?"

"You know, like too beautiful. It gets him into trouble sometimes, so I worry about him, but he's got a much better head on his shoulders than I do. He's probably fine."

Takezawa hesitated again. The others were looking at me from a distance. Considering I'd spent all afternoon interfering with their performance, I wasn't in any position to act chummy with them. I hoped they'd just write me off as an unlucky standin and forget about the whole thing.

"Are you sure you're okay? You're not being taken advantage of or something, are you? That guy's a jeweler? Are you sure everything's okay?"

"...Is jeweler not a particularly upstanding job in your mind, Takezawa?"

"That's not what I mean, he just kinda seems like he's involved in some dangerous stuff. I thought you worked at a shop in Ginza?"

"I do work at a jewelry shop in Ginza."

"Whoa."

Whoa what? I wished he'd stop acting like he'd encountered some sort of rare animal. I pressed him to explain, reiterating that it wasn't a dangerous shop when he continued to hesitate. I guess Ginza is famous for those old fancy clubs. When I jabbed back at Takezawa, saying it wasn't very nice to be so suspicious of my boss just because he was so beautiful, Takezawa conceded, hanging his head.

"Nakata, you suddenly disappeared last winter, didn't you? The professor was

super worried about you, and I was concerned, too. But Shimomura...”

“Shimomura? What about Shimomura? He left for Spain at the beginning of spring. Did he say something?”

“I don’t know if it’s true or not, but he told us that you’d run off to England to party with an extremely wealthy friend. I figured it was a joke, but I guess it wasn’t?”

“W-well, that’s a little misleading.”

“Is it...?”

I guess the blond guy who’d just walked past him must’ve brought the image of me partying in England back to Takezawa’s mind. I wondered exactly what kind of partying he was picturing, though? Probably being driven around in limousines and drinking champagne while eating caviar, even though I’d never indulged in any of those things before. He definitely wasn’t imagining getting dragged around sightseeing in the cold while overheating from a fever, all to bait someone into showing their true selves.

“It’s a long story, but I ended up visiting his family. That’s all it was.”

I didn’t really know how to fix his impression of the situation or Richard. I hoped he’d just assume it was something closer to going to a friend’s home for a visit over the New Year’s holidays. I mean, that was pretty much what had happened in the end.

When I mentioned visiting his family, Takezawa began nodding vigorously. “Oh, I see.”

Enough about my escapades last winter, I really needed to help clean up. I groaned, and Takezawa laughed.

“Going to a friend’s home in another country is pretty cool. I guess since you’re aiming to go into civil service, I figured you were looking for something stable at home like me. Have you considered looking for work in England?”

At about that moment, someone called Takezawa’s name in a scolding tone, and the two of us started to clean up the tables and chairs together. They’d only rented the meeting room for a fixed duration, so we had to hustle to get it

cleaned up in time. The club members who'd witnessed the sticky situation I'd gotten caught up in tried to tell me I didn't have to join in, but I had agreed to help, so I stayed until the end. I even went around apologizing to everyone for all the trouble I'd caused, but apparently, the handsome intruder was popular with the women in the club, so they just told me they wouldn't mind it happening again if a guy like him was involved. I wasn't sure I could make that happen, though.

As I was walking down the hill with Takezawa, drinking the soft drink he'd bought me, the bespectacled man spoke up, like he'd just remembered something.

"When I made it around here, on my way to the café, I tried to call you to tell you that you could leave once I got there. I left you a voice message. I texted you when you didn't pick up, too, but you never replied."

"Oh, sorry about that. I didn't notice, either. Got it. I'll delete them later."

"That's not why I mentioned it."

"Huh?"

When I looked at Takezawa, his brow was furrowed.

"A weird old man approached me when he heard me starting that voicemail with 'Dearest Seigi Nakata...' I wondered if he was someone you knew."

A strange old man approached Takezawa in the park. A middle-aged man of average build. Takezawa tilted his head quizzically.

"I didn't recognize him, so I asked who he was, but he just kinda brushed it off with a laugh and wandered off. It was so weird. Do you have the same name as a celebrity or something?"

"I don't think so at least..."

"Oh. Well, I guess you've had a really rough day today, huh? Be careful getting home—a lot of weird things have been happening to you lately."

"Will do."

It made me glad to hear he'd been concerned about me. I listened to Takezawa's message, which did open with a sarcastic "Dearest Seigi Nakata..."

once, before deleting it on my way home to Takadanobaba on the Yamanote Line. And there had been an older man who responded to my name? Maybe he was one of my junior high or high school teachers? “Seigi” is a pretty unusual name, so maybe it brought back memories or something.

“.....”

Once I finished browsing job sites, as had become part of my daily routine, I did some exercise and decided to go straight to bed. My body wasn’t in the shape it used to be lately, and I hadn’t been practicing my karate, either. Practicing punches always helped calm my mind, so I used it to relax myself, but it seemed I wasn’t going to be in the mood to do so until things settled down a little more.

That was when I got a text. It was from Richard.

“Two cartons of milk for tomorrow.”

It was his usual Friday message. That’s right, tomorrow was Saturday. Got it.

I was looking forward to making some delicious royal milk tea.

I spent some time after that poking around job hunting sites—until I found an ad for a talent agency and saw a picture of Ayame on it. I checked her page on their website and saw it had been recently updated, listing her as affiliated with the agency. She wore a vague glare and those sharp eyebrows, but no spinel ring on her finger. Her battle had only just begun.

I prayed for her success like I was looking at a fighter about to go into the ring. Even Richard had once said that to work was to live and to live was to fight. I was sure Mr. Itagaki was still working as a manager at the agency, too. Even if he wasn’t managing her specifically, they were comrades in arms, and I believed the warmth of their connection would endure.

The backdrop of her photo was a dreamy, beautiful spinel blue.

c a s e

3

Paraíba Tourmaline
Romance

YOU PROBABLY DON'T have many chances to measure your heart rate unless you go to the hospital. It's not really something you'd measure for no reason. But in that moment, my heart was pounding so hard, I wasn't sure how I was still standing there, in the middle of Ginza's Chuo-dori in the early afternoon.

"Hello, Seigi!"

A black-haired girl appeared from the subway exit, just like we'd arranged. She had a fluffy bob that came down to about her collar and wore a bright green cardigan, with a white blouse and a pale cream skirt made of some sort of soft-looking fabric with low-heeled shoes.

She was Shouko Tanimoto, my friend from college.

"T-Tanimoto, d-d-did you have any trouble getting here? You didn't get lost, right?"

"It was fine. I may not be super familiar with Ginza, but your instructions were all I needed. This place sure is big. I'm kinda surprised."

It all started with an offer from my very generous boss, Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian. He suggested that I bring my beloved Tanimoto, the girl I'd had a crush on since last spring, to *Étranger*.

I frantically tried to object when he offered—*wait, please. I definitely do like her, but it's a very one-sided kind of like. She just thinks of me as a good friend. An invitation like that feels kind of weird, so please just wait a little longer.*

But, his words as beautiful as his face, my boss replied, "There is nothing 'weird' about inviting a school friend with the same interests as you to engage in said interests together." "Human relationships aren't static. You should consider the fact that if you don't take the opportunity to invite her here now, you may never have another such opportunity in the future." "You worry too much." "I won't wait."

Tanimoto used to be the president of the geology club back in high school, and she was a pretty hardcore rockhound—that's someone who really liked rocks. As you might expect, she knew a lot about gemstones, too, and she had given me advice more times than I could count. It was true that a jewelry shop

in Ginza might be like a theme park to Tanimoto.

I figured maybe I should invite her after all. Her having a good time was all that mattered to me, and I'd get to watch her enjoying herself, which was a bonus. I took the plunge and invited her. It went well. Time flew by, and then today was the day. It all happened a little too fast.

Honestly, it still didn't feel real that she was here in Ginza with me.

"Seigi, is this the right street?"

"O-oh, yeah. We'll go around this corner, go straight, and then take a right."

"Good. It sure has been getting warm lately, huh? How've you been doing?"

"Great! I'm super-duper great, just like always!"

"I'm glad to hear it! Looking at stones always makes me feel great, too."

"S-sure does!"

I honestly didn't even know what words were coming out of my own mouth. I mean, walking and talking with your crush like this was the equivalent of riding a unicycle while simultaneously spinning plates and eating ramen, right? Thankfully, my feet remembered the way to *Étranger* for me, so she and I managed to get up the narrow stairs and arrive in front of the electronically locked door. Experience was power.

At which point—

"Welcome to Jewelry *Étranger*. My name is Richard, and I run this shop."

The door opened before I could even knock, and we were met with a first-rate smile. It was Richard, not wearing the face he usually did when dealing with me. He was in customer-service mode...and he was very beautiful.

Oh. I guess this is what he meant when he said he'd meet us. Even I felt like I was a customer who'd come to *Étranger* today with Tanimoto.

While I was busy being awed by the situation, Tanimoto bowed deeply to him.

"Hello, I'm Shouko Tanimoto. I've heard so much about you from Seigi. Thank you so much for inviting me to come by today. I know this isn't much, but I hope you enjoy it."

She handed Richard a paper bag. Inside was a decadent-looking box of confections. She'd made sure to pick something with a long shelf life—so thoughtful of her. I suggested we take the opportunity to enjoy it together, and Tanimoto giggled, asking if it would be okay. Richard nodded, agreeing that we should, and invited Tanimoto in.

It still didn't feel real. I couldn't believe that Tanimoto was really in the shop. Two separate dreams of mine had combined to form a strange space that was decidedly not a dream. I felt like my feet weren't touching the ground.

Richard cleared his throat as if to warn me. Right. Just...hang on.

"Tanimoto, I'll be right back. I'm going to make us some tea."

"Okay, thanks," Tanimoto said, smiling like a teacher whom a small child had asked to play house with them. She was adorable.

But cute as she might be, I couldn't just stand around staring at her. I went into the kitchen and got out the things I'd prepared this morning. It was the very first time, and probably also the last, that I'd ever serve this drink at *Étranger*.

"Thank you for waiting, here's your cream soda float!"

I set a coaster down in front of Tanimoto and then a tall glass on top of it. A scoop of ice cream floated in the bright green melon-flavored soda, which was garnished with a cherry—a seedless one. Tanimoto gasped with joy.

"Wow. Is this a café? I thought it wasn't...?"

Well, I'd remembered that it was her favorite and begged my boss, a staunch royal milk tea extremist, to let me make it for her. I'd run to the fancy supermarket in Nihonbashi to buy the flavored syrup and vanilla ice cream. A short but arduous path to get me here—but who cared about any of that when I got to see Tanimoto smile?

"Thanks, Seigi. You only made one for me?"

"Richard and I are gonna have royal milk tea."

"That's the drink you're famous for, right? Could I ask you to make me one for my second drink?"

“Of course! I’d be happy to!” I responded overly enthusiastically. Richard grimaced again. *It’s fiiine. I know I’m acting a little weird, but I’m doing my job.*

Just as we were settling down to have our little tea party with the adorable confections Tanimoto had brought, Richard began speaking to her, his beautiful face still in business mode.

“A little bird told me that you’re quite knowledgeable about stones, Ms. Tanimoto.”

“I’m kind of embarrassed to hear a working professional in the field say that. It’s just a hobby. My parents were always fond of stones, so I got it from them. Still, it’s kind of amazing... Seigi really didn’t seem to know the first thing about them last year, but now he really knows his stuff!”

“A-aw, shucks! Really?! Well, it sure would be nice if I did, anyway.”

“Whether or not he ‘really knows his stuff,’ I can attest to how hard he has been working. While all people love beautiful things, you might say that he possesses a unique talent for loving gemstones.”

“He really might. Last time he showed me his camera roll, it was full of pretty pictures of things like the sky and flowers and stuff.”

“Is that so, Seigi?”

“Yeah, Seigi!”

What even was this? I had imagined them having some kind of advanced discussion about gemstones, but this felt more like a discussion where the only item on the agenda was Seigi Nakata. I was glad that they seemed to be getting along, and relieved that Tanimoto didn’t seem to be enamored by Richard’s looks, but I hadn’t expected this turn of events. Tanimoto smiled as I grew flustered.

“You really are as beautiful as he says.”

“I know, right?” I nodded enthusiastically.

Tanimoto tilted her head a touch to look up at Richard, eyes wide. “So, um, Seigi said you’d show me some stones if I asked.”

“I set some pieces aside just for you. I would be happy to bring them out.”

“Thank you so much.”

Richard smiled and bowed, but he shot me a look only I could see, telling me to pull myself together as he disappeared into the back. Tanimoto’s eyes were still open wide as she let out a sigh.

“He really is beautiful! Like he was born on a gemstone planet or something!”

“Wh-what an incredible metaphor! I wonder if there is a gemstone planet.”

“I think it’s possible. I did read in a magazine that they think there might be a planet orbiting a star in the constellation of Cancer that’s entirely made up of diamond. Really makes you think, huh?”

“Wow!”

A creature from a gemstone planet. It really was hard to believe he was a human like us—far easier to imagine that a man who looked perfect from any angle was a high-quality gemstone cut by a master lapidary. But considering the way he took care of himself, his fashion sense, and the way he styled his hair, you could say Richard was both the cutter and the designer—a skillfully self-made personification of a gemstone. Almost like humans had had no hand in his making. Like if we set a single foot out of line, he could bring the world to an end all on his own.

No, I was getting distracted again. Tanimoto looked at me and giggled once more.

“You’re so cool, Seigi.”

“M-me? Cool?”

“Yeah. I’ve never seen my friends at work before—well, other than Aki dancing on stage. This is so cool. All sorts of customers come in and sit right here, don’t they? I dunno, I just get this warm and fuzzy feeling thinking about all those people drinking the tea you make. It’s incredible.”

“...Oh! You really think so?”

That made me glad, but a little embarrassed, too. Cool? Me? She thought I was cool? It was an incredible compliment, if one so sudden I had a hard time believing it.

I bashfully scratched the back of my head as my boss returned with his box of wonders. I sat up straight again.

Richard set the box on the table and popped it open. I knew what today's lineup was. I was sure it would surprise her.

"Wow!"

Just as I'd expected, Étranger filled with the sound of her little gasp of joy. Richard seemed happy as well.

"Are these all Paraíba tourmaline? Wow. And six of them, too."

"Indeed they are."

"I've only ever seen them in books, not in real life before. Will they be used to make a set or something? Did you acquire them all recently?"

"I expect to sell them all separately. As far as their acquisition goes—to borrow a phrase from my mentor, that's a trade secret. However, I can tell you that they were all mined at different times."

"Oh...I see. It's unlikely so many would be found at once, after all..."

The conversation started to move at Richard's pace, since he was speaking to someone who already knew what he was talking about. It made it a little hard for me to keep up.

Paraíba tourmaline.

There were a lot of stones you'd never be able to forget after laying eyes on them once—sparkling diamonds, fiery red rubies, or deep blue lapis lazuli sprinkled with golden pyrite. Paraíba tourmaline was one such stone. It was a bluish green that reminded me of the shoals off the coast of Okinawa. The intensity of the color was what made them so unique, an eye-piercing vividness that seemed to grab you by the chin and go, "Look at me," even when you were deliberately trying not to pay attention to them.

Richard explained that it was often described as neon blue. The fresh and vivid color of the stones seemed to sparkle. It made me think of a tender jelly made from soda, but like the name said, it was a kind of tourmaline, making it a 7-7.5 on the Mohs hardness scale. Hard enough to stand up well as jewelry.

Naturally, the stone was extremely popular across the world for its incredible beauty, but it was very expensive and rare. They were very rare, too. I'd seen them several times before in *Étranger*, but never so many at once. The pieces ranged in size from the length of my pinky nail to small ones that would be perfect for stud earrings. They each had subtly different coloring but were all vivid shades of neon blue.

I'd asked Tanimoto if there were any stones she wanted to see in particular, but she was so humble that she just told me that she was happy enough for the invitation and felt bad to ask for anything else. I told Richard what she'd said, and I guess the competent jeweler decided to show off. The choice made me happy and embarrassed, too, to the point that I wasn't sure what sort of weird faces I was making today—it was kind of a problem. Richard smiled, encouraging Tanimoto to pick up the stones to get a closer look.

She gently picked up one of the stones from the velvet with her slender fingers and held it to the light from the window.

"Ah...the lighting in here is so nice. I really like how there's so much natural light. I'm not a huge fan of how all the department store jewelry shops just have those harsh overhead fluorescents."

"I'm told that shops which primarily deal in diamonds have lighting designed specifically to their needs. But as our location was originally used as a café, we're a little more relaxed in that department."

"But it's great in here. Even though this place is surrounded by other buildings, you can really see the beauty of each gem. It's incredible how much natural light you get..."

Tanimoto was a third-year Japanese college student, just like me, but she seemed to see the world differently. I'd always taken it for granted that Richard could see things that I couldn't, but I felt it much more keenly when she pointed out things that Richard understood intuitively but that I hadn't even noticed after working here a whole year. Light. I'd gotten used to him using a flashlight or UV light on stones to demonstrate the star in a star sapphire, or the line of a cat's-eye, or the color change property of alexandrite, but I never realized natural light could make such a difference.

Tanimoto giggled happily. “Seigi, you sure found an incredible part-time job. I’m so happy for you.”

“...I-I think so, too, from the very bottom of my heart!”

“Now tell me what you *really* think.”

“Oh you, Richard! Don’t tease me!”

Once again, it was Seigi Nakata versus the allied forces of Richard and Tanimoto. Honestly, I was probably the happiest I’d ever been in my life, but I was also just as embarrassed.

Tanimoto returned the Paraíba tourmaline to its original place, took a sip of her drink, and sort of stared off into space for a bit. She looked happy, but also a bit sad somehow. Was she okay?

“...Um, I didn’t ask to see anything in particular. Why did you decide to show me this stone?”

It was a strange question—and one that felt like a cover for what she really wanted to ask. When people asked why someone had done what they did, there was usually a deeper reason behind it. People so often brought varied and troublesome mysteries into *Étranger* that I began to panic a bit when I felt that familiar atmosphere fill the room.

“What’s wrong, Tanimoto? Is everything okay?”

“Huh? Everything’s fine! I was just so happy, I started remembering all sorts of things. Something from junior high, in particular.”

“...From the geology club you were in?”

“Yeah. You sure have a good memory, Seigi.”

She’d gone to a combined junior high and high school and had been involved with the club since its founding the whole time. She was really driven.

Tanimoto smiled again, but it was a bit more strained than before. She looked like she was forcing herself to smile, even though she didn’t really want to.

“Um, well, the mysterious Paraíba Phantom Thief came to my junior high once.”

“Phantom thief?”

“A jewel thief,” Tanimoto replied without hesitation.

She took another sip of her drink while I was busy blinking in astonishment. A jewel thief? Did they really show up at *schools*? Wouldn't they usually frequent, like, art galleries and museums? Such mysterious mask-wearing figures only existed in fiction. Or at least, I'd thought they did.

I looked at her, waiting for her to continue. Tanimoto chuckled.

“It's true. Um, it's kind of a long story. Are you sure you don't mind?”

She was seeking Richard's permission to continue. My beautiful boss gently opened both his fair hands to encourage her to do as she pleased, and Tanimoto continued.

Apparently, the geology club was founded entirely because Tanimoto desperately wanted a club focused on rocks. She'd always enjoyed talking about rocks at home with her parents, but her classmates' lack of interest in the subject made her feel lonely, and she wanted to introduce everyone to how much fun geology could be. She explained that she hadn't been thinking quite so logically at the time—she just wanted to do what she could to inject more rocks into her daily life. Very on-brand for her. I guess geology was already a big part of her life back then.

Tanimoto was persuasive, and her junior high school didn't have a lot of humanities-focused clubs, so a geology club fit the bill perfectly. Tanimoto was the president and she had two co-vice presidents, a girl and a boy. The boy's name was Sora Aikawa, and the girl was Misuzu Shimura. They were both passionate and impulsive, so Tanimoto had to keep them on a short leash, but they all became close friends with a mutual interest in rocks.

“I kinda miss it. We used to go out to geological formations and rocky outcrops together, or go beachcombing for opals. There are so many great places out there for fun geology field trip adventures. There's earth below your feet no matter where you go, after all, and the earth is where you'll find rocks. It's fun to go somewhere and ask how it came to be the way it is, to consider how the land formed.”

Admittedly, that seemed like a pretty elevated form of fun for junior high schoolers. But it was just right for Tanimoto, someone who'd always loved rocks and had the relevant background knowledge. And the club was for kids who could relate to the way she enjoyed things.

A faintly bitter smile appeared on Tanimoto's face as she explained that the club had earned itself a lackluster reputation among her other classmates because, while it let you go off on field trips, it was also a club without a fixed faculty advisor. The teacher in charge would change from time to time.

"So, I ended up suggesting we go to a mineral show."

The way she said "ended up" making the suggestion caught my attention. Mineral shows were events with a festive atmosphere that had rocks and minerals on display and for sale. I was a little frustrated that I'd spent a whole year thinking about going to one and never actually followed through, but I did remember seeing advertisements for several just in Tokyo.

Maybe she'd phrased it that way because they weren't really the best places for kids? They weren't elementary schoolers, though. Surely an outing like that would be fine for junior high students? Especially if it was an event within the city.

I mumbled something to that effect, and Tanimoto gave a pained smile again.

"Yeah, well. The thing is, one of our vice presidents—Misuzu—came down with the mumps, so she was the only one who couldn't go. The field trip itself was a big success. Even though everyone had only had 500 yen of spending money, we all had fun finding things to buy and ended up with a shockingly big haul."

Oh, I could see where this was going. Once Misuzu recovered from the mumps, she probably came back to the club to hear everyone talking about how much fun they had at the mineral show.

"After that, Misuzu started to feel out of place at the club, because even when she did show up, everyone was just talking about the mineral show. And she'd been so looking forward to going. Sora and Misuzu were good friends from back in elementary school, but, I mean, does anyone really want to make their friends worry about them? Plus, Misuzu was the type who liked to take

the lead while Sora followed. So when things started to go sour between them, it was hard on them both. Even watching it happen was painful.”

And so, President Tanimoto waited for the right opportunity and proposed that they all visit a mineral show again. But the school cautioned that it wasn’t appropriate for club activities to frequently require spending money, so they weren’t allowed to buy anything this time. And not being able to buy anything spoiled the fun of going to a show with things on sale. Club members began to feel like they’d be better off going on their own than with the club, if that was the case, and started making plans to do just that with their close friends in the club.

“And Misuzu said that she ‘wasn’t interested,’ because ‘I have Paraíba tourmaline at home, so I’m not going somewhere with a bunch of weird stones on display.’”

So that was where Paraíba came in, huh? Admittedly, the phantom thief still hadn’t shown up. I glanced over to see my boss’s face.

Richard listened to Tanimoto speak, his expression just as warm as it usually was when he heard a customer’s story—no, perhaps even a little warmer.

“At that point, no one really cared about the mineral show anymore. Books about gemstones were more popular among the club members than mineralogical and geological texts, and most of them would answer ‘Paraíba tourmaline’ if you asked them what their favorite stone was. The photos were so pretty, everyone was speculating about how much lovelier they must look in real life. I didn’t have anything that valuable at home, so no one came over to see my collection.”

But Misuzu said she had one. As you might expect, the club members started by asking her why she’d kept quiet about it and ended by demanding that she show it to them. Misuzu explained that it was a very expensive stone and she didn’t own it, her parents did, so she couldn’t bring it to school. The kids around her started demanding to know why she said *she* had it, then started questioning if she really did at all, before concluding that she’d been lying about the whole thing.

Kids have to learn a lot of tough lessons. One such lesson is learning to let

things go. I remembered feeling like there were an awful lot of kids in elementary and junior high school who would thoughtlessly bombard you with questions that you didn't want to answer, and all you could really say in response was that it was none of their business. As for *why* they asked those questions, the only reasons I could come up with were "because they were curious" and "because the person asking the question didn't think it was a particularly sensitive issue."

Like when they'd ask why no one from my family came to school on parents' day. Or asking if my mom did anything at home, since they'd heard I cooked. Everyone developed differently, but I felt like your ability to consider other people's feelings shot up around high school, maybe just because of all the changes in your environment at that point. You had to be really lucky to make it to adulthood without once having to feel the way I did when I was put in that position.

Misuzu was backed into a corner, all because of something she said herself. So, at the next club meeting—the following Tuesday—she declared that she'd borrow the tourmaline.

"'Because I'm not a liar,' she said."

She was adamant that she would bring it. But...

I knew I looked like I was at a complete loss for words. Tanimoto smiled softly and kept telling her story—not to me, but to Richard, who sat there in silence like a decorative object.

"So that brings us to Tuesday of the following week. The club typically met twice a week after school on Tuesdays and Fridays in one of the science rooms. But this time, a phantom thief appeared in the science room."

"O-one really showed up at a school?!"

"It's true."

Tanimoto pouted in response to my doubts, but then smiled. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't struggling to believe her. I half doubted it. But she said it happened, so it probably did.

"Just before the meeting, the club members and I borrowed the key to the

science room from the office. We were headed there when we saw a strange person. They were wearing a black silk top hat, the kind that looks like you could pull a rabbit out of it, a black cape, and a white mask that covered their whole face, like you might see in a musical.”

“Now that’s suspicious!”

“I assume this is our ‘phantom thief.’”

Tanimoto replied “yes” with a smile in response to Richard’s comment. Her tone remained light as she told the story.

“The phantom thief was in front of the door to the science room. They looked like they’d been about to leave, but they realized we’d seen them and ran back into the room in a panic. And then they vanished. The room that the club met in was at the end of the hall on the second floor, and just outside the window was a weird kind of rooftop space. The kids in the science club would go out there to set off fireworks during summer break. There was a fire escape leading down from it, so it would be easy to escape if you had to, but students weren’t usually allowed out there.”

“Did that cause a huge scene?”

Tanimoto turned her head and smiled, “It did. There was a bit of a commotion at first, with everyone demanding whoever pulled the prank come forward. We searched for suspects but never found them. They’d vanished like smoke. In the end, people started to dismiss the incident as us having mistaken a black curtain for something else.”

No way. But why “phantom *thief*”? Aren’t thieves supposed to steal things? Was this just the story of some weirdo in a costume?

Tanimoto, seeming to know what I was thinking, added, “I think the thief had already done what they were there for when we spotted them and just fled in a hurry at our arrival. When we followed them into the classroom, we were all shocked—a case with Paraíba tourmaline in it was sitting right in the middle of the table.”

Huh? So the tourmaline really had made an appearance. A rare stone suddenly appearing in the middle of a club room, left by a phantom thief. Every

jewel thief in the world should aspire to pull off such a thing.

But why?

Why would anyone do that?

Tanimoto forced a smile as she continued.

“Everyone went to check with Misuzu if that was it. She didn’t say anything. A teacher showed up right after that, and everyone ended up focusing on the suspicious intruder. We never followed up with Misuzu. After that, the members of the geology club called the mysterious person the Paraíba Phantom Thief.”

And that was the end of that?

Tanimoto said as much, let out a sigh, and finished her drink. She smiled and thanked me. At Richard’s urging, I went into the kitchen to make some more royal milk tea. I decided to consider it an opportunity to think.

I wasn’t really in the right frame of mind to mull over what had happened in the story she’d just told. I felt like I could understand the gist of it from Tanimoto’s lighthearted tone—it just wasn’t that big of a deal. Schools were still public institutions. The appearance of a so-called “phantom thief” would be hard to explain to parents, meaning the school couldn’t afford to leave the matter unresolved. The fact that they’d done so anyway must have meant that the school administration had decided that it would be better for the students that way. But even if that were true, I couldn’t understand why. And it was hard to imagine the story could really end so tidily there.

If it really did end there, I think Tanimoto would have looked like she was having a bit more fun. As she told the story of the phantom thief, she’d have had the same look on her face that she got when talking to me about stones, or maybe the expression that reminded me of that debonaire sniper. I really liked that face of hers.

When I finished preparing the tea and returned to the lounge, Tanimoto seemed to be talking to Richard about something. They both glanced at me when they noticed and pulled away from their conversation. I guess it was a secret between the two of them. Richard looked a little uncomfortable.

“Thank you for waiting! May I present to you Étranger’s specialty: royal milk tea!”

“Thanks, Seigi. I was really looking forward to this.”

Tanimoto smiled politely at me as she took a sip of her milk tea, which was just the right temperature. She said it was delicious. I was so happy I could have struck a fist-pumping pose, but the conversation had paused at an awkward point, and I felt weird letting it show. Tanimoto seemed to have picked up on that, because she set her teacup down before starting to speak again.

“...The rest of the story of the Paraíba Phantom Thief isn’t very dramatic. Misuzu changed schools right after the incident. We were at a combined junior high and high school, but Sora tested for an outside school and then transferred somewhere else in high school. The two of them never talked again after that. We didn’t have cell phones back then. If your only point of contact with someone was their address and landline, you wouldn’t know how to get in contact again if they moved.”

Tanimoto smiled again. It didn’t look forced. It was a smile that seemed to say, *Well, that’s just what happens when you’re a kid*. Was my excessive concern making *her* concerned about me? It felt like something that had happened to me before. I desperately wanted to tell her not to read too much into it. *I’m just a big worrywart, I can’t help how I act when I get concerned. It’s embarrassing*.

“One has to wonder why exactly this Paraíba Phantom Thief left that stone behind when they departed.” Richard’s raised voice broke past as I was gesturing incoherently, as if to put a stop to my wild ruminations.

Was that really the most questionable aspect of the story? In my mind, Misuzu and her friend Sora had cooked up a plan with Tanimoto to prepare the costume and the Paraíba tourmaline, create a big scene that the whole club would witness, then escape down the fire escape and rejoin everyone in the midst of the confusion, pretending to be none the wiser.

“Do you have any ideas, Ms. Tanimoto?”

“Huh? Well...maybe the thief thought it would get in the way while they were escaping?”

“It was a single case with a small gemstone inside, yes? It’s hard to imagine it could have been all that cumbersome. Personally, I can’t help but wonder if that stone had some kind of power to ward off evil—a power that summoned you and your club members and chased the would-be thief away.”

Richard continued in that baffling vein, like a shrine maiden conveying the will of the divine.

“Paraíba tourmaline is, as you know, an exceedingly rare yet extremely popular stone. Who would honestly want to part with it once they got their hands on it? Perhaps the stone’s brilliance and beauty held the power to repel the intruder to whom it did not rightly belong—a power that dispelled the cloud of ill-fortune they brought with them. But however it got there, in the end, the stone remained in the hands of its rightful owner. What a wonderful story. Thank you for telling it.” Richard bowed.

Tanimoto was taken aback. I didn’t understand it, but she looked completely confused. And then—

Like a memory suddenly hit her, tears came flooding down her cheeks.

“Wh-wh-wha—Richard! What did you say to her?!”

“No, Seigi. I’m sorry, I’ve been so busy lately it’s turned me into a bit of a crybaby. Just ignore me.”

“I can’t do that! Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Tanimoto replied.

More tears spilled from her eyes—but this time, she was smiling. Her cheeks were red, like a little kid feeling relieved when they were finally scolded for a prank. All I could do was offer her some tissues. She thanked me in a nasally voice, blew her nose, and smiled.

“Sorry for losing my composure. Seigi’s told me so much about you, but you really are an incredible person.”

“Did my part-timer describe me as some manner of six-winged ectotherm, or something similar?”

“He told me that you’re the kindest person in the world.”

Oh. That. Maybe I did say that.

Richard flinched a bit, and Tanimoto's smile deepened. I didn't really understand why, but I could feel a kind of warmth flowing between them.

"...Sorry, Seigi. You don't know, do you? I'll explain the trick."

"The Paraíba Phantom Thief wasn't a real thief, but, umm, that boy you were friends with or someone else playing the role, right?" I blurted out my own theory. It had to be something like that. There's no way the school would have just let an incident with a suspicious intruder like that go otherwise.

Tanimoto looked at me with her moist, dark eyes and nodded.

"Yeah. Sora did it for me. We planned it together. Sora would play the thief, I'd prepare the costume and take everyone to the office so Sora could get away down the fire escape. We didn't think Misuzu really had a Paraíba tourmaline, so we thought we should just make good on the promise for her. The mineral show was that Sunday, and we figured if we couldn't find any, or any that we could afford, we could buy a small, loose aquamarine crystal that was darker in color. As long as we swapped the label on the case, the club members would probably buy it."

It was exactly like I thought. But what was all that talk about the stone warding off miasma and stuff? Tanimoto continued.

"The teachers concluded that it must've been a prank of some sort by one of the theater kids. Maybe Sora explained what happened to them in secret, though... There weren't any big gossips among the club members, and the teachers didn't make a big deal of it, either, so they all let it go pretty quickly."

"But," Tanimoto continued, "Misuzu told me that she'd 'misjudged' me. It seemed like she knew Sora had been the phantom thief and got the whole story from him."

When Misuzu met Tanimoto alone after school, she laid into her—not in an explosion of emotion, but in a matter-of-fact yet clear tone. She thought it was awful that Tanimoto, someone she respected, would deceive everyone like that, and that it was unbearable that someone who had a habit of saying "stones don't lie" would lie so easily to people. She told her that the fact that

she had conspired with Sora was a deep betrayal, and then, she left in tears.

“Th...”

That doesn't make it true. Or so I felt...but ultimately, that was just my opinion.

Tanimoto had probably felt that way in junior high school, too. Also, what was Sora doing while all this was happening? He was just as culpable. I mean, shouldn't he have confronted Misuzu with Tanimoto and been the one to tell her that she was partly responsible for the situation as well? No, Tanimoto would never do something like that. She's more the type of person to just grin and bear it by herself.

“I wouldn't worry about it, you know? Kids are just like that.”

“No.”

Tanimoto shook her head, teacup still in hand.

“Misuzu was mad at me back then because I didn't believe her.”

Tanimoto smiled bitterly like the memory was in the forefront of her mind, making dimples in her red cheeks.

“The most important thing of all wasn't whether Misuzu actually owned the gemstone. As the president of the club, what I should have done back then was believed Misuzu when she said she was bringing the stone. Rather than causing a big scene, I should have asked her to show it to us like she had promised. Even if she couldn't actually produce it and had to give excuses to explain herself, I should have just said ‘aw, that's too bad,’ and laughed it off with everyone. Believing in someone or being their friend means having that kind of faith in them. But because of all that phantom thief nonsense...Misuzu forever lost her chance to prove whether she actually owned such a rare stone...”

Tanimoto closed her eyes.

“I don't think I would have been able to bear it if something out of my control had happened that made all my friends think I was a liar when I was a kid. Especially if it all happened because of a friend I trusted, too.”

Richard didn't say a word, and I didn't, either. But I felt like, at least from my

perspective, Tanimoto was being way too hard on herself. I mean, this was something that happened back in junior high. When I was that age, I was getting scolded by the old men in the neighborhood for racing my friends along the river, getting scolded by my karate instructor for my bad form, getting scolded by Hiromi for saying I wasn't going to high school—my point is, I was a hopeless brat who was getting constantly scolded. I thought I remembered making an effort in my own way, back then, but that was just my perspective.

Maybe Tanimoto was doing the same thing—judging her kid self by adult standards. Even if you found yourself dwelling on what you wished you'd done differently, there was a limit to what you could do about it. Though that made me wonder—why was it that we blamed ourselves so much for things that happened in the past?

“Ultimately, I think I just wanted to do *something*. I remember really clearly what I wanted to happen. I really thought it'd let Misuzu and Sora have fun with me at the club again. But what ended up happening couldn't have been further from that. In the end, I ruined everything.”

Tanimoto's expression wasn't especially dark. She had the same, somehow superficial smile on her face as she did when she was telling the story of the Paraíba Phantom Thief. Maybe this was her way of punishing herself. It felt like icy spikes were studding the inside of my chest.

“If I were to reflect on what happened, like we do in my teaching classes, I might say something like this... We may dream about how we wish things would be, but if we let those dreams stay dreams, we'll never learn how to make them a reality. We may even find ourselves working against those goals, at times. What I'd like to do is approach this in a systematic way, leaving myself enough time to consult with a third party wherever possible and avoiding doing anything rash...or something like that. But I guess saying all that rings a little false.”

Tanimoto laughed. Before I could say anything, Richard raised his hand. Tanimoto smiled and told him to go ahead.

“This is nothing more than a hunch, but would you mind if I asked you one thing?”

“You can ask me anything you like.”

“This isn’t so much related to the story itself, but do you think that perhaps Misuzu had a crush on Sora? That was my first thought when she mentioned feeling betrayed.”

“Huh? Oh, good question. I think you might be right. I didn’t know what to say, so I told her that I loved her just as much as I loved Sora. But somehow that wasn’t the right thing to say...I really did love both of them, but I feel like my ‘love’ never seems to make the people I love feel very happy.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

I’m sorry, Richard, I know that look on your face means you have something you want to say. I know it’s Richard the jeweler’s turn to speak, but Seigi Nakata has a thing or two to say as well. So just let me borrow a little time. Just let me say it.

“I know you have a very strong sense of responsibility and that’s why you think about all this stuff, but don’t you think you’re taking it a little too far? I mean, the geology club was only founded because of your love of stones. And despite this phantom thief thing, everyone had a lot of fun and made a lot of nice memories before that, didn’t they? Does that sound like a ‘love’ that doesn’t make anyone happy? Because it sure doesn’t to me. It makes me so sad to hear you say things like that. I wish you’d stop doing it, if you can.”

I hoped she didn’t hear me getting a little choked up at the end there, but it was true, it really did make me sad. Tanimoto had brought so much joy to my college life, I didn’t want her to think that way about herself. It kind of felt like she was saying the things I liked were no good, too, and I couldn’t bear it. I knew that wasn’t what she meant, admittedly, but still.

Tanimoto looked a little surprised and stared at me for a bit before finally smiling from ear to ear.

“...Thank you, Seigi. You’re right. I guess I’m overgeneralizing. I can’t say that something won’t make *anyone* happy without testing it with all seven billion people on Earth, huh?”

“Well you make *me* very happy.”

She took a breath and smiled. It was strange. It felt like the first time since she'd come to the shop that I was seeing the usual Tanimoto. Her expression was somewhere in between her Golgo Tanimoto face and the face she had when she was talking with her friends. Her eyes looked a little tense, but she seemed relaxed at the same time.

"Um, Seigi, there's something I need to tell you."

"Huh? Me specifically?"

"Yeah," she nodded, her black eyes fixed on me.

"I told you about how I'd been trying hard to get a boyfriend this whole time, right?"

"Uh..."

Why was she bringing that up here and now? Was I really in a position to be talking to her about her boyfriend situation? My heart rate shot through the roof. This was not good. What was she going to say?

She stared intently at my face.

"That was, um, a lie. Sorry."

"...Oh."

"I haven't been trying at all. And I don't have even the slightest interest in getting a boyfriend."

In an instant, the boat named Seigi turned 180 degrees on its projected course. A full starboard turn. But it wasn't particularly distressing. I'd fantasized about how happy I'd be if she asked me to be her boyfriend, of course, but there'd always been this sense that it wasn't going to happen lurking in one corner of my heart. Like a fire extinguisher sitting next to a stove with an impressive flame going.

"I feel bad because I know you put yourself on the line to give me a chance to try, but I don't think I can do it after all. I agree that romance might just be a stone I don't know yet, but it feels so removed from me—like that planet made from diamonds orbiting a distant star. Maybe I just don't have the courage for interstellar travel... I was always fond of sayings like, 'A wound to the back is a

warrior's shame,' and 'It's best to die on your feet, moving forward,' but I guess I'm kind of turning my back and running away before the fight even starts."

Those were some pretty dire mottos to be fond of. Had I befriended a girl with the heart of a samurai? That was so cool it almost gave me chills. Well, never mind that for now.

"W-well..."

"Why is it that you characterize your decision as 'running away'?"

A crisp, cool voice cut between us. It was like a spring breeze rushing in through a window that no one remembered opening.

It was Richard.

The beautiful jeweler dispersed the tension in the air, took a leisurely sip of his royal milk tea, and began to speak.

"I know it's quite inappropriate for a total outsider who knows nothing of this particular subject to speak on it, but I hope you'll allow a humble Englishman to offer a few words. Ms. Tanimoto, how do you conceive of yourself? As a cog in a machine, perhaps? Or as a singular stone?"

A cog or a stone. I could generally understand what he meant by the idea of a cog—it was a component that helped other things move smoothly. And various kinds of cogs came together to form a large machine. I guess it was a metaphor for humans and society.

So what did that make the stone? What *is* a stone? I wasn't really sure what comparison he was trying to make here, and wondered if it made sense to Tanimoto.

Tanimoto never looked remotely upset and thought for a moment before mumbling, "Hmm. I think I'd be a stone. I guess it depends on what the stone's made of, exactly, but I don't think I could be strong enough to be a cog."

"If I had to pick between the two, I think I'd say the same about myself. There's a man who's something of a brother to me—a man who's something of a fool and was very set in how he viewed himself. He'd often say he wished to become as hard as steel, so he might be the suspension bridge that smoothed

and supported our family's relationships—but the thing is, people can't live like that. Or rather, they don't *need* to live like that. After all, we are living beings of flesh and blood. It is our nature to change, not to remain static. As living creatures, time carves itself into our bodies as the days add up, so we can never be precise, uniformly cut gears."

Richard had opened by calling himself a "humble Englishman," but whenever I heard him talk like that, it made me want to ask the standard *Étranger* question—"are you sure you're not?" It sounded like something one of my humanities teachers would bring up. Change is what defines us, nothing in the world is truly constant—stuff like that.

Wait, weren't we talking about romance? How does that connect to any of this?

Richard continued before I could ask anything stupid.

"Humans are creatures that can only recognize the present moment as reality. But that present changes, moment by moment. For example, someone who was bisexual in their twenties might decide to identify as heterosexual in their thirties. Or someone who considered themselves heterosexual at age seventeen might realize that they're gay at age twenty-five. Someone who may have considered themselves polyamorous and open to relationships with anyone might feel as though they've met their soulmate at age fifty-five and become monogamous. Of course, this isn't true of everyone—but from a statistical perspective, changes of this nature aren't at all unusual. It's just like how, if left to their own devices, our hair and nails will continue to grow. It might be difficult to imagine this, being so far removed from our day-to-day lives, but some countries have recently been incorporating more awareness programs into children's education to let kids know that those possibilities exist."

Come to think of it...

It would be pretty nice to know who you were and what you should be doing from the moment you were born. I mean, there were people who dreamed of studying dinosaurs in elementary school and ended up getting their PhDs in paleontology, so it's not like it never happened. But most people weren't like that. As you got older, you had to start thinking about how to compromise

between your own abilities and assets and what society expected of you. Find a path that you could make work.

Richard was saying that that sort of thing wasn't limited to the "career planning" oft-discussed by those looking for jobs after college. No matter what your interests or preferences might be, things changed—and that was normal.

Tanimoto was silently gazing at the blue-eyed jeweler. Richard continued.

"Perhaps a fitting metaphor for a similar continuous series of small, progressive changes might be a flip book. Of course, this is all merely my personal perspective."

A flip book. A common sight in the corners of notebooks. It might look like little drawings on each individual page, but when you flipped through ten or so pages at once, the drawings seemed to move. The people who get really into it might do sixty or a hundred or even more pages to complete a really impressive piece. And while the changes from one single image to another might be minimal, the more you flipped past, they grew all the greater. I guess that's what he meant.

Richard opened his mouth again, as if to add something on for good measure. Tanimoto was looking him right in the eye as he did.

"What really matters is that you never forget that while you possess the potential to change, your present self continues on to become your future self. And that the things the present you cares about are connected to the things the future you will care about. I know it's hard to decide what choice will be best for you, if I were in your position, I would not think forcing myself into a romantic relationship would be that choice. It would be like emptying your wallet to buy a stone you didn't even want in the first place. Would it not be all the more enjoyable to wait until a gem you simply can't bear to be without crosses your path? Of course, I think it is a wonderful thing to expand your horizons and try new things, but only if predicated upon respect for yourself. While dying on your feet is all well and good, one wrong step might make it nothing more than foolhardy and reckless. And perhaps in the same way. a strategic retreat isn't running away so much as it is a change of course."

Oh.

Richard was telling Tanimoto not to force herself. In a very polite, delicate, and indirect way, he was telling her the same thing I wanted to tell her.

That she shouldn't force herself into a romantic relationship. That would be just as absurd and rude as forcing yourself to befriend someone you don't really want to be friends with. I was sure Tanimoto knew that, too. That's why even though she considered trying to find a boyfriend, she didn't. Because she didn't need one.

At least, not right now.

Even after Richard finished talking, Tanimoto continued looking at the beautiful jeweler's face. She gazed at him intently. When he fidgeted, seeming a little uncomfortable, Tanimoto smiled cheerfully and wiped her eyes with a tissue.

"The name of this shop is *Étranger*, right? It means 'foreigner,' 'stranger,' or 'outsider,' right?"

"Precisely," Richard replied.

I knew how the shop had gotten its name. Richard had named it when he knew he would be running the shop in Japan—it seemed to imply that it was a lonely shop. He said he had given it that name because no matter where he went, he never felt like he belonged.

Tanimoto chuckled with a warm smile.

"When Seigi told me about this place, I thought it was a shop run by a foreign man who would show his customers wonderful gemstones. I see it's actually a shop that provides kindness and comfort to those who see themselves as *Étranger*."

I would never forget the look on Richard's face in that moment for as long as I lived. His blue eyes went wide as he looked at Tanimoto in shock.

Something warm seemed to flow between my angel and the most beautiful man in the entire world. If I had to name that something, I think it might be a sense of kinship between them. Richard was a very proper man, so I had never once seen him make a face like that when interacting with customers before. It was a fleeting moment—like two strangers on different train lines locking eyes

for a brief instant as the individual tracks drew near—but I knew I saw it.

And I was sure it was a very fortunate thing. For both of them.

“It makes me both very happy and deeply honored that you would think so.”

“This really is a wonderful shop. I’m so glad I came. Thank you for inviting me, Seigi.”

I shook my head. I should have been thanking her. If the two people who had guided me to the world of stones were both feeling joy, I couldn’t possibly be happier. But I felt like saying anything would destroy the atmosphere, and I didn’t want to ruin it.

Tanimoto smiled and gulped down her royal milk tea, and Richard popped the newly acquired tea snacks into his mouth. The juicy confections of grapes wrapped in a thin layer of mochi didn’t really seem like they should be gobbled up so hastily, but he’d done a lot of talking and probably needed some sugar to recharge his brain. Well, whatever. He was the one who was going to open up the snack cabinet later and secretly despair about them all being gone. I would just have to pretend I didn’t notice and buy some more if I found them for sale somewhere—and keep the receipt, of course.

Once things relaxed, Tanimoto started looking at the tourmaline again.

“It really is a beautiful stone. I believe it’s named for the Brazilian state of Paraíba where it was first found, but were any of these actually mined in Paraíba?”

“These came from a mine in Paraíba. The others are from Mozambique and Madagascar.”

Huh? What were they talking about? Where the stones came from? As my eyebrows began to wiggle, Tanimoto smiled and beckoned me over. I crouched down next to the box and peered at the captivating gems.

“Um, Paraíba tourmaline was first presented...about thirty years ago, right?”

“In 1989 at the Tucson Gem and Mineral Show.”

“Of course you would know the answer. Once they let everyone know that such a beautiful stone existed, it became explosively popular around the world.

At the time it was only found in Paraíba, Brazil, but lately deposits have been discovered in Mozambique and Madagascar. Hardly any of it probably comes from Paraíba anymore.”

“The high pace of the mining operation likely caused the mine to run dry rather quickly. The supply had nearly run out already by the start of the nineties.”

Richard continued, saying that it didn’t mean *none* were being produced at all. I guess you couldn’t definitively say they were all gone as long as there were areas that had yet to be mined. But even though the state of Paraíba hardly produced any now, the stone still bore the name “Paraíba tourmaline” because that was the area it was first discovered.

Tanimoto giggled.

“I guess it’ll be called Paraíba tourmaline forever, regardless of where it actually comes from, huh?”

“That does seem highly likely, considering how long the name has stuck.”

“I’ve always thought it was interesting what made a stone a gemstone. I mean, it’s just that someone thinks it’s pretty, right? There isn’t really any distinction chemically.”

“From a jewelry perspective, the stone’s rarity and whether it is durable enough to withstand manufacture are critical elements, too.”

Richard added that the most important factor was still a stone’s beauty, of course. Hearing him of all people say that seemed to fill the room with a mysterious atmosphere. *A gemstone’s main appeal is its beauty.* I remembered him talking about that back at the orchestral music club’s café the other day.

But what *exactly* was it? What *was* beauty? I was well aware of its power, but what exactly was it in concrete terms?

The most beautiful man in the world—at least as far as I knew—smiled warmly at Tanimoto.

“Beauty, however, is a very fragile thing. Just as there is no one person that every human on Earth will agree is beautiful, I believe there is no one stone that

everyone desires. That said, perhaps that is why my job exists. There would be very little need for people like myself if stones were all just intrinsically appealing right out of the ground.”

“I guess that makes jewelers kind of like producers for gemstones, huh?”

“Perhaps you could say that.”

“You really are an incredible rockhound, huh, Richard? Like, if you were to ask the difference between Paraíba tourmaline and regular blue tourmaline, I’d say the copper content. That’s the kind of stuff I’m good at. But when it comes to the issue of gemstones, which is intrinsically based in beauty, I struggle to approach them from that perspective...even though I *do* think they’re beautiful, too. I guess it makes me anxious, wondering if I can share the feelings of people who look at them and think, ‘wow that’s gorgeous!’ But today you taught me that even though I may look at them from a different perspective, we all love stones just the same, and that there are people among them who will earnestly listen to what I have to say. That’s made me very happy. Thank you very much. I don’t think I’ll be able to buy any jewelry for a while still, but I’m going to start saving up for it.”

Tanimoto smiled a little awkwardly, and Richard smiled back and bowed.

“You are always welcome here, whether you’re looking to make a purchase or not.”

It was just about noon. Tanimoto had mentioned that she had some mock lesson exercises with her fellow teachers-in-training starting at two. It sounded awful. People who were at the same point in their education met in a classroom, made up lesson plans, conducted class, and then thoroughly critiqued each other’s errors. I thought the economics department did some practical work, but I guess studying to become a teacher was *really* hands-on. That said, I supposed it gave them a concrete sense of the goal they were aiming for.

“Good luck with your mock lesson. It sounds rough, but I’m rooting for you.”

“I’ll be fine. The longest ones start in fourth year, so this is just a warm-up, really.”

Richard stood up immediately after she did. Richard would never leave a customer standing alone. Tanimoto bowed to him, and Richard responded with an even deeper bow.

“Thank you very much for the visit. It was truly wonderful talking to you.”

“It was my pleasure. I do have one last, rather superfluous question for you to sate my own curiosity.”

“And what might that be?” Tanimoto asked, cocking her head to the side.

“Regarding the tourmaline the thief left behind. I wonder, was that stone genuine Paraíba tourmaline?”

“...What do you think, Richard?”

“I have faith that it was real.”

Tanimoto let out a little sigh. She seemed happy. I guess he was right. Like she said herself, she could have gotten a deep blue aquamarine or some other stone to fake it, but that wasn't her style. I would have thought so if I'd been there, too.

“How fortuitous. It may be rather substantial in price, but it is a mineral that one will almost always find at a mineral show.”

“Yeah. The stone was only about the size of a poppy seed—too expensive for a junior high schooler to buy without a second thought. But I think the shop owner could tell how serious we were, so he gave us a deal... I remember being happy about that, but thinking back on it now, and given how things turned out, I feel some regret, too.”

“I see,” Richard said, cocking his head to the side.

I had to wonder what that meant. If we kept her too long, she'd be really pressed for time—and when he started talking about gemstones, it could get *long*. Admittedly, I was very familiar with how charming that could be as well.

“I think it was extremely important to know whether the stone left behind by the Paraíba Phantom Thief was real Paraíba tourmaline or not. They may have taken a long and circuitous route, but I believe your feelings reached their intended audience in the end.”

“What do you mean?”

“Two of the six stones I showed you today came from a Japanese dealer. Opening sales channels in Mozambique and Madagascar is extremely cost-prohibitive both in terms of finances and language and cultural barriers, but the companies I engage with do not balk at such things. I had heard of the incredible efforts one of their young dealers has been going to. She’s a young woman about your age. I asked her why she thought Paraíba tourmaline was so well loved by so many people, and she told me a most curious story.”

“What kind of story did she tell you?”

“She told me the tale of a mysterious phantom thief appearing at her school and then vanishing.”

I found myself unconsciously tensing my lips. I stared at Richard’s face. Was he being serious?

The beautiful jeweler spoke very matter-of-factly. “I only heard the rough outline of the story from her, as it was the first time we had met. I told her that it would be a very interesting story if it were true, and the young man who was interning at the same shop with her replied that it *was* true. ‘I was the phantom thief, after all,’ he said.”

While Tanimoto and I were taken aback, Richard pulled a business card case from his pocket and handed a card to Tanimoto. It wasn’t a card for Jewelry Étranger. It had an address in Okachimachi on it. It looked like contact information for a distributor of colored stones. There was no specific position written on the card, which Richard explained was from a young woman currently working at a shop that dealt in colored stones while studying at a trade school.

And the name was—

“Please take it. She told me that she had someone she wanted to apologize to.”

The name was Misuzu.

It was written in traditional Chinese and Roman characters as well. The card seemed to suggest it was meant for people from various parts of the world.

“The shop in Okachimachi operates seven days a week. Their phone number is on the card. Use that knowledge as you see fit.”

“I never would have imagined this in my wildest dreams. I’ll call and then go visit.”

Tanimoto smiled at Richard, looking half-confused and half-delighted as she bowed deeply and thanked him. Then she turned to leave. Why does time have to fly when you’re having fun? She was only going to get busier from now on. And with me on the job hunt and having all these papers to work on, I was running out of space—like being in a room where the walls were slowly closing in on me. You have to graduate college after four years, but your last two are mostly eaten up by looking for a job. I guess it should be a given that things get a lot tighter as time goes on.

Before Tanimoto had arrived today, my heart was pounding as hard as it possibly could, but for the first time in that moment I felt like the time had passed too quickly.

“Seigi, see her off.”

“...Huh?”

“Take care,” Richard waved with a composed expression on his face.

Tanimoto told me I didn’t need to worry about her, but I told her I wanted to walk her to the station. *All right, I’ll see her off. Because that’s what my boss told me to do.* I did at least want to walk her to the station.

I waved to Richard and left Étranger with Tanimoto.

The stinging rays of the sun were growing stronger with each passing day. Ginza was a city of concrete after all. I had always thought of it like a perfectly arranged model of a town that people just borrowed space in, but it was the opposite. It wasn’t a space where massive buildings like you might find in the heart of Shinjuku take center stage, and it didn’t have the messy hangout atmosphere of Shibuya. The people who came here put comfort as their top priority and pursued it to the point of almost being distasteful. That was how I thought of Ginza now. Just like how Étranger’s interior featured no excess—well, maybe there was a bit of an excess of sweets. But it wouldn’t be Étranger

without them.

“Thank you for today, Seigi. I was really surprised. I mean, Richard shouldn’t have known anything about me, right? That really was incredible. I need to make that call when I get home.”

“Richard isn’t a bad guy. He’s just a little too smart for his own good sometimes and frequently surprises customers like that.”

“I know. I don’t think he’s a bad guy at all. I could never thank him enough for everything he did for me today.”

“I was a little worried a few times, though,” she mumbled to herself. I didn’t know what she meant by that, but she didn’t continue so I didn’t pry. We turned the corner at Shiseido Parlour, walked past the Uniqlo and over to the Kyukyodo, where the stairs down to the underground mall came into view. When I walked down the stairs with her, side by side, I wondered how we looked from afar. Probably like a couple. But it looked like about half the people in Ginza at the moment were foreign tourists on a bus tour. They were all preoccupied with shopping rather than us. For a moment, I imagined two people looking at each other through the windows of two separate train cars. And how the further you move down the track, someone who felt like they were right beside you can vanish as if they were never there in the first place.

Apparently, she took the Marunouchi home. It was a reasonable distance from the exit we came in through. As we talked together through the underground mall, I tried to think of when to break the silence. I already knew what I wanted to say, the rest was just a matter of timing. But I felt like I had already taken the decisive step, all that was left was for me to figure out how to say it.

“Um, so, Tanimoto.”

“Hmm?”

It came out a lot smoother than I’d expected, even without taking a deep breath beforehand.

“Back at the museum that one time, I said something to you about how I thought it was a shame not to fall in love, or something like that. I’m not saying

this because Richard told me to, but I've wanted to apologize to you for a while. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said any of that without understanding anything."

"You don't need to apologize. If you hadn't shown up that day, I might be Shouko Homura right now. I only found out through a letter, but Homura got married, right? His wife sounds like a wonderful person. I'm so happy for them. I'm so happy he didn't settle for someone like me."

I thought the way she put it was pretty misleading, but I knew what she was trying to say. She didn't feel any desire to have a "special" relationship with anyone, regardless of their gender. But Mr. Homura wasn't like that, and that's why she was happy that he found his special someone.

I gulped and started talking again.

"Um, so, back then if I had asked you to go out with me, um...what do you think you would have said?"

"Huh?"

Tanimoto stopped in her tracks. The famous stained glass of the Ginza subway station was visible off in the distance—red, blue, yellow, green. It was like an aura around her. It was almost dizzying. Tanimoto looked at me.

"Um, do you mean like go out with you like boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"Yeah."

"...Hmm."

Tanimoto murmured to herself as she thought. I was grateful. And I knew that she wasn't the type to be overly delicate in situations like this. Just like Richard wasn't, either. Both of them were extremely sincere people who would never betray their own beliefs.

"...I don't really know a good way to put this, but I guess it'd put me in a bit of an awkward position. I feel like it'd be kind of a shame."

"A shame?"

"Yeah," Tanimoto said softly and nodded. "You see, I have no idea how to be a girlfriend, but I do know how to be a friend. I really like you, Seigi. I want to be there for you, and from the very bottom of my heart, I want all of your struggles

to work out well for you in the end. So I want to make sure I do right by you. But...if we were to start a romantic relationship, I wouldn't have the slightest idea what to do. So that would put me in an awkward position, and it'd be such a shame, because I want to be able to do more for you than that. And that's why I'd rather be your friend."

"Oh, I see."

"Yeah."

"Well, now I'm glad I didn't have the guts to ask you to go out with me back then."

"You were gonna ask?"

"Yeah, I guess I thought it might have worked."

"Huh. I guess that really would have been an emergency evacuation from my engagement, huh? I wouldn't have to get married that way... Seigi, you really overthink things. You don't have to worry about me so much. I know how I can come off sometimes, but I really can take care of myself."

"I know. But I wanna worry about you sometimes."

"You know, you're almost too good of a friend, Seigi. It's kind of amazing sometimes."

"It's because I like you. Because I like you the same way you like me. I admire you. I want to be there to help you, and I want everything to go well for you."

"That's kinda embarrassing. Thank you. I'm going to try hard to become a person who deserves you as a friend, Seigi."

She thanked me.

That's right, she thanked me. We chatted about Paraíba tourmaline until we reached the ticket gate for the Marunouchi Line, and that's where we parted ways. I was sure that this girl, who loved stones and white clothes and who had brought sunshine into my life more times than I could count, would become a great teacher. She understood both the pain of a child with no one to turn to for help and that of one who had put their friend in that position. I think it would be great if there were more teachers like that. Honestly. She didn't need

to be by my side specifically.

It would make me very happy if she let me be part of her life like that. I'd thought that so many times. But only I needed to know that.

I mumbled to myself as I wasted about ten minutes wandering around the underground mall to try to psych myself back up—looking at every wall and mysterious carving and old map and even gave the bronze statue of Mercury's head a pat before returning to Étranger with the cheeriest face I could muster.

"Mission accomplished! Nakata reporting for duty again! ...Richard?"

Something was strange. Nothing had really changed inside the shop since I'd left—I mean, Richard's box of wonders had been put away, but the tea and the sweets were still out, and Richard was sitting in one of the lounge chairs like he had been rooted in place. Ever since I'd started working here, I'd never known Richard to just leave things out like that. When I looked at the clock, I realized I'd been gone for almost thirty minutes. What on earth was going on?

"Richard, what's wrong? Are you not feeling well?"

"I was thinking."

Thinking about what? Richard was staring intently at the table at something I couldn't see.

"...I'm wondering if it was right of me to say that to her."

Say that? What was he talking about? I didn't think he'd revealed any personal information or anything like that. And Misuzu, who had become a Paraíba tourmaline dealer, clearly wanted to get in touch with Tanimoto. That had to be why she gave him her card. Richard knew of Tanimoto, but didn't have enough information to be sure she was the one Misuzu had meant. Or was he talking about something else?

I silently cleared the plates and made my boss another helping of royal milk tea while the shop was empty. I made myself a cup, too, while I was at it, setting them softly down on the glass coffee table. Richard looked at me. He seemed to be expecting some sort of answer.

"I told her not to force herself to fall in love."

“Oh, that’s what you meant.”

“Despite knowing how you feel about her.”

“Oh, that’s why you were asking.”

“I...I don’t know why I did that.”

He seemed genuinely remorseful. What exactly was Richard the jeweler trying to say to me?

“The way I see it,” I said, “right now, you’re hung up on the ‘why.’ You know you’re just not the kind of person who could claim to be acting in a customer’s best interests while twisting your own beliefs to accommodate them. You wouldn’t have become a jeweler if you were that kind of person.”

“But—”

“On the other hand.”

I dropped my voice a bit lower. Richard’s expression looked a little grim. Good, my serious tone was getting across to him.

“On the other hand, if you used your silver tongue for my sake to offer Tanimoto some ridiculous argument about how she needs love and has a wonderful potential partner sitting next to her, I would have quit. On the spot.”

“.....”

Richard didn’t look all that surprised. He just looked exhausted. Admittedly, his sugar intake was rather out of proportion with the amount of talking he’d done today. I decided I should probably open another box of sweets before the next customer arrived.

While I remained quiet, however, Richard cocked his head affably to the side.

“...Why would you quit?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Because obviously you wouldn’t be yourself if you did something like that. Because the Richard I know isn’t the kind of person who would say anything that wasn’t in a customer’s best interest, or who would force his own ideas on them. You’re not the kind of person who can do terrible nonsense like that. I’d say goodbye and assume you had an identical twin

brother who came to Japan and took your place.

“Plus, I’m getting busy with this job hunting stuff,” I tacked on in a light tone, and for the first time Richard seemed to realize I’d brought him another cup of tea. His perfect lips curved into a smile. It made me happy, too.

“I feel like having you around has made me a better person than I was before.”

“I dunno what I’m gonna do if you get any better than this. You’ll turn into a total angel at that rate.”

“Speaking of angels, your angel was a wonderful young lady.”

“Can you lay off?”

“I’ve upset you.”

Huh?

Richard kept his eyes on his tea and announced, almost like he was compelled to, “When you were preparing tea earlier, she...I’m not sure how to put this... had a very severe look on her face.”

“O-oh, I know what you’re talking about.”

I think he meant that face she would always make where her eyes narrowed and her brows got real intense. I thought I just didn’t get an opportunity to see her make that face today, but I guess it happened behind the scenes. Richard continued in spurts.

“I will refrain from going into detail about what she said, but in a very serious tone, she told me that I didn’t know how much I had hurt you last year, and demanded that I never upset someone she cares about like that again. And then she bowed deeply.”

I felt like my heart had leapt out of my throat, done a little tap dance, and then hopped back into my mouth and returned to its rightful spot. Pounding didn’t even begin to describe it. It was like the finale of a fireworks display. I felt like I was going to have a heart attack and die. I remained silent, unable to even ask a basic follow-up question, and Richard hung his head.

“I’ve heard that the relationship between employer and employee is strictly

hierarchical in Japan. I had intended to take a ‘when in Rome’ approach when I hired you, but not anymore. I wanted to help you in my own way. But perhaps that was arrogant of me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I think she truly cares about you. That much is obvious.”

“I didn’t need you to tell me that.”

I’d really thought it would be wonderful to date her, of course. I really did. And even now, after the moment of truth had come and gone, I still believed that somewhere in my heart. Love sure was annoying.

But now I had another feeling of similar strength lurking in there. It was the feeling that I was okay with that not happening.

“You worry too much. Do you think I’m mad at you because I think you interfered with my romantic chances? That couldn’t be further from the truth. I’m grateful for what you said.”

Richard the jeweler had pitched Tanimoto a softball. What he didn’t realize was that it had reached me, too.

“Beautiful neon blue tourmaline is still called Paraíba tourmaline even if it doesn’t actually come from Paraíba, Brazil, right?”

“Well, yes.”

“Then maybe wanting to be just as important to someone as a romantic partner is just as good as wanting to be in a romantic relationship with them.”

Just like how it’s still the same Paraíba tourmaline even if it doesn’t come from Paraíba, Brazil.

I didn’t think it really mattered if the source of the feeling was romantic or platonic. I wanted to be important to her, and working hard to achieve that goal meant something. Plus, she was happy this way, and I thought I could make it work pretty well. I mean, I thought I *had* been making it work so far. It was a little bit lonely, but as someone who wanted to see her happy, getting to see her come alive in the shop today made *me* really glad. This included being glad that she got along with Richard, someone I also cared about a great deal.

So I told him that the reason I was tearing up a little right now wasn't serious. I really meant that, too. Richard was here, so the needle on my comfort level meter had shot straight up from where it had been while I was in the underground mall. I was just feeling a little emotional, that's all. It wasn't a big deal. Tanimoto had cried tears like pearls here earlier as well. I guess it was crying weather today in Étranger. But that was all right.

Richard didn't say a word, but set a box of tissues in front of me before disappearing into the kitchen. He was probably trying to give me some privacy. I appreciated it. He'd had his own fair share of heartbreak. After a bit, he came out with a piece of chocolate cake from a famous shop on Chuo-doori. It was a little square confection, but one bite filled my mouth with bitter chocolate flavor. It was almost too perfect for the occasion. I kind of hated it.

"...Thanks."

"You're very welcome. Humans are creatures that never stop changing. While I would caution you against expecting too much, if you wait, perhaps a new vein of Paraíba tourmaline will be discovered. Hope is simply a matter of how you accept the cards you're dealt. I hope that bright light illuminates your future as well."

"Yeah, you're right. Maybe Tanimoto will want to fall in love someday...no, you know what, maybe I'll find someone else to love! Like a wealthy bombshell of a woman or something."

"I can't recommend selling your future short while you're in a state of shock. In time, your own frivolity will make your heart ache with self-hatred."

"Thanks for hitting that nail a little too hard on the head..."

"Our next customer will be arriving in thirty minutes. Take some time to try to pull yourself together before then."

"Will do."

"And bravo. You did well today."

It's not nice to punch someone who's already crying below the belt like that. It'll just make them cry even more, I thought, and Richard got himself a serving of that chocolate cake and began to indulge himself. My eyes had mostly dried.

He really could enjoy sweets no matter the circumstances. And with such beauty and elegance it made you just want to forget everything else for a moment. I should eat some more, too. Sweets made you feel better. They always did the trick.

That day, I stayed late to help Richard thoroughly clean the shop before I left. It was Saturday, but he had a business engagement, so no free dinner for me. Richard said we should have dinner again next time. I think he was trying to cheer me up. Pretty brazen if you ask me.

I wasn't in a position to be wasting any more time, so I hurried back to my Takadanobaba apartment to start preparing for more job hunting with a renewed sense of purpose. There might be new information about applications.

I came out of Hanatsubaki-doori, trying my best not to remember what had happened that afternoon, and took a right once I got out onto Chuo-doori and started walking to Shimbashi Station when—

“Seigi. Seigi, is that you? I can't believe I finally found you.”

—my fate changed.

When I turned around, I saw a man standing there. A single middle-aged man who had come to a stop in the middle of that big street in Ginza, still swarming with tourists. I would never be able to forget that face for as long as I lived. Not his face, not his voice, and not the way he greeted me.

“I've missed you.”

The man standing there with a smile on his face raising his hand to greet me—the same hand he used to beat my mother, Hiromi—was none other than my biological father.

c a s e

4

The Tanzanite
of Rebirth



“I’VE BEEN HAVING IT REAL ROUGH. Mom died, you know—that would be your grandma. Pneumonia. She was 95. I bet you miss her. I miss her, too. And I’ve got no one to cook for me and no pension now, either.”

There are any number of restaurants open late in Tokyo. The man began chatting happily as we made our way to the second floor of a fast-food joint. I could have theoretically just ignored him and gone home. In fact, I tried to do just that at the last two restaurants we went into, but he kept following me and started saying he’d just have to drop by Hiromi’s then, so I reluctantly let him talk. That said, I was pretty sure he was lying about knowing Hiromi’s address, but I couldn’t be sure.

“How old are you now, Seigi? I heard you’re in college. I heard someone call a kid your full name back when I was lazing about Meguro and that really surprised me. One of Hiromi’s old workplaces told me your last name’s Nakata now. I thought it might’ve been you so I tried asking, but he didn’t know anything but the name of the school you’re at. You sure are smart, Seigi. My old man went to Kasaba, too, you know. That’s my boy. He was studying law, though.”

“So I went to your school saying my son attends Kasaba University, but I don’t know what department he’s in, but they wouldn’t tell me anything even though I had documents to prove I’m your father. I guess they’re even strict with the parents these days. After that I just started looking all over the place. Shinjuku, Shibuya, et cetera.”

“But I didn’t expect to find you in Ginza. I like Ginza, too.”

“You remind me of my old man, Seigi. You’ve gotten so handsome.”

As his nonsense flowed in one ear and right out the other, I abruptly cut in.

“Lemme guess, you need money?”

“Huh?”

“Is that why you were looking for me? Because you’re broke?”

That’s the kind of man he was.

His name was Hisashi Shimeno. He should be turning forty-nine this year. He was my biological father and, as far as I knew, one of the worst and most useless people out there. I didn't think even ten years would have changed that.

The man, with his unsettlingly childish features and medium build clad in a filthy green polo shirt, knitted his eyebrows as if to suggest my glare was upsetting him as he tried to brush it off with a smile.

"Like I said earlier, Mom died. I miss the old bird. I was livin' in her house for a while after that, but I fell behind on the water and gas bills and stuff, and they cut me off. I didn't have a choice—I had to rely on my neighbors to get by. But before I knew it, the house got seized, and I was thrown out. I don't have a job, so I was in a real pickle."

Accepting anything this guy said without question was tantamount to getting scammed into giving a little kid more candy while they held a chocolate bar behind their back and insisted they hadn't gotten any yet. So let's go through the alleged "facts." His mother was dead, her pension had stopped, and he didn't have a job at the moment. He probably wasn't even working part-time. I didn't think he had it in him. I didn't think it was that easy to kick a gambling habit, either, so he'd probably started racking up debt with no way to repay it and put the house up for collateral. Hence why it was seized, and why he was probably out in the cold now. I wasn't really sure how his "lazing about" was any different than being homeless, but it's not like it really mattered.

"You really have grown up, Seigi. You were still in elementary school last time I saw you."

My biological father was smiling as he looked at me.

I stared at the old man, my heart clad in a sheet of steel. He was a little younger than Hiromi. He had a corporate job back then but quit, saying his boss was an idiot who didn't understand anything he said. After that, he'd had a string of jobs that he would quit almost immediately. Honestly, it's a miracle that he had a job when Hiromi decided to marry him.

Hiromi had already divorced him at the time since he had started to get violent with her, right after she gave birth to me, but since we needed the settlement money from the divorce and my child support, I had to go see him

several times. He hardly paid anything, though. When they split, they both signed an agreement, but since it wasn't notarized or formally filed at the courthouse, it didn't matter if it was signed or stamped—it was just a piece of paper with no legal authority backing it. But Hiromi didn't know that at the time. As far as I remembered he only ever paid a little bit of the settlement once, but I'm sure that money had actually come from his recently deceased mother. Based on Hiromi's mumblings, she had tearfully tried to comfort her when she heard her son was hitting his wife, telling her to bear with it, and that her husband had done the same to her, so it was inevitable. She didn't even try to help.

"Seigi? What's wrong?"

The middle-aged-man sitting in front of me had a painfully innocent look in his eyes. Where did he get off asking me that? When he saw that my expression didn't change, he mumbled:

"Oh, I get it. You lived with Hiromi, so I'm sure she poisoned you against me. That just breaks my heart. But don't worry. We'll be able to live together as father and son now."

"Excuse me?"

"I don't have a home. I want to live with you, Seigi," the man smiled.

"...I don't know what you're talking about. Obviously, there's no way that's happening."

"Of course there's a way. Are you telling your poor dad to sleep outside? You would really be that cruel?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

When I said that, the man who was supposed to be my father looked at me, confused. Like the person standing before him wasn't a person at all but a penguin or something. I didn't want to think about it, but I remembered this face of his. It was the same look he had when Hiromi was vomiting in the hallway after he'd kicked her, and I got up the courage to ask him not to do that—he just looked down at me with those eyes. It was this odd, puzzled look, like he was wondering what this strange creature was doing talking to him. It didn't

seem like the concept of two-way communication existed within his head.

“You know the police will come and throw kids who don’t support their parents in jail?”

“In what country? The police aren’t going to care. And you aren’t my father anymore.”

“I’ll always be your father, Seigi. You’re made up of half of me, after all.”

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I was hoping this restaurant would suddenly explode and be wiped off the face of the earth. We were the only customers there at present...but I supposed there were the part-time workers. That ruined that idea.

“What are your plans for the rest of the day? You’re not going home yet? Are you meeting with your friends?”

“Phone call incident aside, how did you figure out where I live?”

“It was completely by chance! I guess we really do share a bond as father and son. If Mom were still alive, she’d probably say that our souls were calling out to each other, guiding us back together. I couldn’t be happier.”

Some things are just a waste of time to even hope for. I hadn’t seen him since I was in elementary school, but it still felt like just being around him sucked all the energy out of me. There were times when I thought maybe he’d gotten his act together, just a little, but it was always illusory in the end.

“Do you feel any remorse at all?”

“...For what?”

“For beating your wife.”

“Huh? We’re divorced, so she’s not my wife. She’s got nothing to do with me anymore.”

Oh, I see. You got divorced, so she’s not your wife anymore, and since she’s just a random stranger to you now, the violence doesn’t count. I get it. What I don’t get is how someone can think like that. I guess the word *remorse* wasn’t in his dictionary. Or maybe he just had the memory of a fly. I still don’t even know why he hit her in the first place. I don’t think I’d ever be able to

understand that even if I tried.

“Leave.”

“And go where?”

“Anywhere. Go sleep under a park bench for all I care. Go back to wherever the hell you came from. I have neither a home, nor food, nor a bed for you. Get out of my sight.”

“But Seigi, you’re my son. My dear, dear son.”

“And? You said so yourself earlier, once you got divorced, you had nothing to do with us anymore. We have no relationship.”

“Marriages are different. You can’t sever the bond between parent and child. I played with you when you were little and took care of you when you got sick.”

“Don’t make things up. The only time I ever went to your house was to bring you a demand letter from Hiromi about the settlement money you owed her, and to do it again when you ignored it the first time. I do remember staring off into space on the porch, though.”

“You always did like soaking in the sun. You were so cute. But she really is an awful woman. I shouldn’t have let someone her own son won’t even call ‘Mom’ keep you. She hit me, you know. It really hurt.”

“Because you hit her.”

“That doesn’t make hitting someone right.”

My cheek began to twitch. Was he being serious or was he just trying to provoke me? I couldn’t tell. Either way, I felt like I was about to snap. I felt an urge to do something about his stupid smiling face that wasn’t even a meter away from me. I can’t, though. I can’t let him manipulate me like this. And what the hell did he mean by *letting* her have me? He’s the one who said he had no interest in raising me. What, was he going to tell me Hiromi lied about that and he really wanted to raise me himself?

The man timidly shrugged, as if he had sensed some indescribable force in my eyes.

“You seem tired today, Seigi. You’re grouchy. Let’s try talking again when

you're feeling better."

"I'm not interested in talking to you. Leave."

"Oh, calm down, you're being disrespectful. But I guess I can't blame you for being shocked to see your dad again so suddenly. So don't worry about it. I'll see you later," he said and left the shop. He didn't hesitate for even a moment. Maybe he could sense the murderous rage building within me.

In fact, he left almost a little too easily. I couldn't help but wonder if he was plotting something.

He was probably expecting me to go straight back to my apartment after I left the restaurant. I was sure he was going to follow me. Thankfully, shitty as his personality was, he wasn't very smart. But I couldn't let my guard down. I figured the best option would be to spend the night at an internet café or a hotel instead of going back to my apartment to throw him off. I despised the idea of taking money out of an ATM while he was watching, but he shouldn't be able to do anything if he didn't have my card or my pin.

But what about Hiromi? Should I call her?

I thought about it, but ultimately decided against it. Once the guy gave up and slunk off back to wherever he came from, that should be the end of it. He was always smiling, but he turned into a violent brute in front of Hiromi. She'd had to get a restraining order against him—but it had been well over a decade since then, and the order wasn't valid anymore. What was keeping him away from Hiromi now wasn't the law. Aside from the misfortune of my blood relation to him, Hiromi's negative connection to him couldn't even compare to mine. We were afraid of him coming after us for a while, so I changed schools twice in elementary school. At the time I thought Hiromi was just being paranoid, but thinking back on it now, there was nothing groundless about her fears—it was a perfectly reasonable defense against her ex-husband.

I didn't want to stay near Shimbashi Station, so I got on the Yamanote Line going in the opposite direction than I usually did and went into a capsule hotel in Akihabara. When I was handed a free toothbrush, I suddenly thought of my breakneck trip to London. Somehow, I actually remembered to bring a toothbrush on that trip.

Tomorrow was Sunday. Was I going to go into Étranger?

I pondered the question in the cube-shaped space that looked like it belonged in a math exam and came to the conclusion that I shouldn't go in. If I were him, and had just lost sight of one of my few potential sources of income, I'd go back to the last place I saw him and ambush him when he came back, since he'd probably go the same way again. And the spot he found me was a stone's throw from Étranger. He probably had no idea about my connection to Richard, but just in case, I wanted to avoid causing the beautiful jeweler any trouble.

My fingers flew across my phone screen as I bounced my leg anxiously, taking about three seconds to type out a text. It was full of typos, so I took a moment to correct each and every one of them.

"I know this is last-minute, but I can't come in tomorrow. I'm very sorry."

Maybe I should have put something in about having some job-hunting engagement come up. I just sent it as is because I knew if I hesitated, I probably wouldn't have been able to send it, but I had to wonder what I'd have thought if I'd gotten a text like that.

I got a reply almost immediately.

"Understood. Did something happen?"

What *didn't* happen, more like. I'd encountered my long-estranged biological father, who I was not particularly excited about seeing, who told me that his broke ass wanted to mooch off me. I'd only been away from Étranger for a few hours, but I felt like I'd lived several decades in the time since. I was exhausted. But this had nothing to do with Richard.

I thought that saying something had suddenly come up related to job hunting and I wasn't quite sure how long it would take was a pretty good excuse for me, so I replied to that effect. I was frustrated with how that awful man's visage was lurking in every little action I took. I was breathing hard, so I left my capsule for a moment to buy a bottle of water from the vending machine and chugged it down. But I'd drunk too much and my stomach wasn't very happy about it, so I couldn't sleep.

When I did doze off, I had a weird dream. I was sitting on a sunny porch,

watching the dust fall through the light, and there came Richard walking along the wall surrounding the yard. I didn't think he should be here, but Richard noticed me staring off into space and tried to open the gate and come inside. Our house in Omiya was pretty big. It was a Japanese-style home built just before or after the first Tokyo Olympics. It had a small pond in the yard, but no fish. Basalt pavers led from the gate to the sliding door of the entryway. The cupboard was filled with china from Ginori and Noritake and some other names I wasn't really familiar with. Almost all of it was smashed to pieces after he started getting violent. I wanted to tell him to stay away, but my voice refused to cooperate. I flailed around, but he didn't pay attention to me. When Richard got to the entryway, that man appeared, brandishing his fist.

I didn't know what time I'd fallen asleep when I awoke with a groan at 5 a.m. I really should have still been asleep. I fiddled with my phone as I rolled over, dozing off again, when I noticed I'd gotten another text from Richard. "*Can you talk for a moment?*" It was from three hours ago. I let out a sigh. Even if I'd noticed it three hours earlier, I probably would have ignored it. He was terrifyingly good at getting people to talk. And there was nothing I could reasonably tell him under the circumstances.

What was I even going to do with myself today? I didn't have work. I had a whole day and nothing to do.

I found a random chain café in Akihabara to study for my exams and do some research. Then I spent 300 yen on a baseball cap to use as camouflage, and loitered around looking at things in a big-box electronics store, and wandered around the busy pedestrian mall. Before I knew it, it was 7 p.m. I thought about going to *Étranger* several times, but I couldn't risk it. If this storm would pass just by me bumbling around and not doing anything, then not seeing Richard for a day was a price I was more than willing to pay.

It was Sunday, so the Yamanote Line wasn't especially crowded as I made my way to Takadanobaba and headed back to my apartment, when—

"Welcome home, Seigi! You didn't come home yesterday, so I spent the night wearing myself out, going between the park nearby and a convenience store. It might be summer already, but it's still cold at night."

—I was greeted with the worst thing possible. How? How did he know where I lived?

When I pressed the smiling man for an answer, he just said that someone nearby told him. Who was this “someone nearby”? I’m not proud of it, but I wasn’t exactly close with any of my neighbors. The man started to laugh as he spoke, like there was something funny about the way I looked.

“Are you in a club or anything, Seigi? Or on social media?”

Neither. I’d been recruited to help out with that sort of thing before, but I’d never gone out of my way to form those kinds of associations. When I remained silent, the man laughed and started to do something on his phone. It was one of those pre-paid ones, the kind that would stop working if you didn’t regularly top it up. I guess he wasn’t lying about being broke.

“Here, look.”

What he showed me was a page for the orchestral music club I’d helped out with a little while back. It was some kind of online community that used real names for accounts, Takezawa was even on there under his full name. One of the other members had made a thread about a devastatingly handsome man coming to the café. “He seemed to be a friend of Nakata’s,” it opened. “Nakata who?” Someone with a girl’s picture for an icon asked. She seemed to be a girl from another school. “He’s in my exam prep class. He works part-time in Ginza iirc,” Takezawa replied, and that’s where the thread ended. It was ordinary small talk. It was just that it would be online forever and depending on the privacy settings, anyone could find it.

“I had an idea, so I went and looked up that Takezawa kid’s page. When I saw that he was in an exam prep class in the economics department, I tried calling up the professor who teaches it and swung by his office to say hello. We had lunch the other day. I told him I was going to see my son for the first time in a while and I wanted to surprise him, so I asked if he’d give me your address. The professor didn’t seem to know exactly where you lived, but one of the students sitting next to us mentioned knowing you and gave me your address. I went to Ginza because I’d heard you worked there part-time, so I took a stroll thinking I might bump into you. Did I surprise you?”

Surprised didn't even begin to cover it. But the thought of giving him even an inch was intolerable. I ignored him and curtly told him to move. But he acted like he didn't hear me and stayed where he was. *I told you to move.*

"You can't be here. I have no intention of housing you. If you keep loitering outside my home, I will call the police. Now get out of my sight."

"Still in a bad mood? I'm your real father!"

"How many times do I have to say it? So what?"

"Don't you think the police will just tell us to settle the issue between ourselves if you get them involved and I explain the situation? That'd be so embarrassing. I'd suggest you not."

It was an unusually logical argument for him. No, I guess all of his arguments were "logical"—you're strangers once you get divorced, family members should settle disputes among themselves, even if you hit someone, they don't have the right to hit you, and so on. Every one of his "logical" arguments were objectively fatally misguided, but they beat endlessly on my mind. It was disgusting.

"So does that mean you're going to leave on your own?"

"...Seigi, in the short while we've been apart, you've started talking strangely—like you're a different person. What happened? I'm sure things have been rough. Let's talk. I'm your dad. You can talk to me about anything. Why don't we stop talking out here and go inside?"

I just about panicked when I felt myself come close to blurting out that I was thinking about how badly I wanted to punch him. My thoughts had been a pretty serious mess since I ran into him yesterday. I mean, given this situation, it'd be weirder if my thoughts *weren't* a mess...but I was a bit bewildered at my brain going straight to fight rather than flight. I guess I just wanted to get rid of this intruder into my life ASAP. Maybe it was just a sense of frustration as I was trying to clean things up or something. That didn't feel quite right.

"Seigi, where are you going? Aren't you going home?"

"To the hardware store."

"You look exhausted. Why don't you take a break? If we keep talking out

here, it'll bother your neighbors."

I wasn't interested in talking. This was now a war of attrition. I could probably hole up in my apartment and never let him in, but if I did, I'm sure this middle-aged man with violent tendencies would throw a tantrum like an unruly child and I'd be forced to take responsibility for him. Like I said, too much time had passed for the law to keep me or Hiromi safe. It was almost as if the legal system was saying that after so much time, you might as well be strangers, and that people can change after all. While I was trying to pass the time, I spent most of the day researching how to handle an exception like this, but most of the laws applied only to stalking or issues in romantic relationships, and unless the domestic violence was still actively happening, they wouldn't lift a finger. So where did that leave me?

The one positive in the current situation was that he didn't go anywhere else when I didn't come home yesterday. He must not have been able to pin down the location of Hiromi's house the same way he'd found my apartment. That was the one good thing. That meant if I could resolve it myself, it would be over.

"What kind of work do you do in Ginza, Seigi? Do you work at a restaurant? Or are you a cashier at a shop? I bet it's a fancy shop since it's Ginza, after all. You're real trustworthy, after all, Seigi."

"And I guess you're studying about money, since you're in the economics department, huh? That's pretty incredible. I just know you'll be rich in the future. A son who's smart and wealthy—a father couldn't be happier."

"And you cook, don't you, Seigi? That's incredible. I can't make anything. I miss my mom's cooking. All I've been eating lately is instant curry—since Mom died, that is. I didn't know her pension would stop when she died."

I completed my purchase at the hardware store when the cashier told me it'd be 1,500 yen. I hadn't said a word to him, but the man incessantly following me seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Hey," I said.

"Hm? What?"

“Have you ever thought about dying?”

“Dying? Why are you bringing up something so morbid?”

“Well, I have.”

“Huh? That’s awful. Don’t think about things like that. It’s not normal. It’s creepy.”

“When I was in elementary school, I thought about killing you and then myself.”

And right now, I felt—just slightly—like maybe I should have actually gone through with it.

Horrific incidents of all sorts happened every year, even in the peaceful country of Japan. And yet, you can still buy knives at the hardware store. The man seemed to have finally noticed that I’d bought a blade and put a little distance between us.

“Seigi, this isn’t a joke. You’ll get put in jail.”

“You wanna try me to find out if I’m joking?”

“I don’t understand what’s compelling you to say things like that. I’ve loved you since the day you were born. I don’t understand why you’re acting like this toward me when I came all this way to find you. It was a lot of work. Has your heart turned to ice, Seigi? Have you become a bad boy?”

“Are you leaving or not? You make your decision now. I’ll give you thirty seconds.”

The hazy twilight, the distant sounds of cars, and the look of shock on the middle-aged man’s face all melted together, becoming one strange color—almost like some kind of famous surrealist painting.

“Look, Seigi, I can’t go back to the house in Omiya, the debt collectors, they —”

“Twenty-nine, twenty-eight...”

“Just listen. Listen. You’ll be punished if you treat your father like that.”

“Twenty-seven, twenty-six, twenty-five, twenty-four, twenty-three...”

"I got it, okay? All right, we can try again later. What's your phone number?"

"Twenty-two..."

"You're cruel."

The man started to stumble away before stopping and looking me in the eye. *What? If you start talking to me I'll just start the countdown again.*

"...I feel bad for you. You only turned out this way because of how awful your mother is. I guess being smart doesn't get you very far. But you have a father so no matter how awful of a son you are, I won't abandon you. Think about it—really think about it. You only have one father in this whole world. If I give up on you, you'll be all alone."

"Twenty-one."

This time the man actually left. I wanted him to keep walking like that forever. I wanted him to keep walking across the ocean and into the far reaches of space until he was gobbled up by a black hole.

I stood there until I couldn't see him anymore and let out a big sigh. I wandered around aimlessly for a while before I picked up an abandoned newspaper, wrapped my just-purchased knife in it, and stuffed it deep into a garbage can marked for unburnable trash.

I started flipping through real estate magazines on top of my civil service exam textbooks and job-hunting magazines. I didn't notice someone was trying to talk to me for a bit. Where even was I? Dust floated through my field of view. When I lifted my head, I could see a big picture in the middle of the split stairs. I was sitting at a table next to the entrance of the main library. Tanimoto was sitting next to me.

"Seigi. Seigi? Are you okay? You don't look so good."

I didn't really know what to say in a situation like this. I just stopped myself from telling her to shut up because she was annoying me, but that wasn't the sort of thing I should say to her. I needed to just make something up. Anything. Anything to sound normal.

“Oh, um, I just didn’t get enough sleep last night.”

“...Is something bothering you?”

Something definitely was bothering me. A man I hadn’t seen since I was a child came to me demanding that I support him. And he’d probably be back again soon enough. It was more stress than just losing some sleep. But it was definitely an off-putting subject.

“I, um, I wonder if it’s something I can help with. Wanna go out to get something to drink? I’m sure we could both use a break about now.”

“Yeah, that might be a good idea. Maybe I’m just tired. Yeah. Ah...”

Just as I found myself thinking about how cute her smile was, I was overcome with an awful feeling—like my heart was being torn out of my chest. It wasn’t disgust directed at Tanimoto, but myself. Or really, less disgust and more fear. What the hell was this even? Tanimoto seemed surprised. I was, too. I couldn’t think of anything to do but try to laugh it off.

My awkward laughter echoed through the library. A few moments later, I realized how off-kilter it had been.

“...Maybe it’d be better if I wasn’t here.”

Tanimoto looked hurt. Did I really look so bad that it made her make that face? I insisted repeatedly that I was fine, but she just silently nodded a few times and waved goodbye as she left. I was surprised by how relieved that made me feel. She wasn’t the one I wanted to go far away.

No. If I really thought about it...the person I wanted to “go far away” was *him*.

My eyes returned to the real estate magazine. I found a listing for a place in Takadanobaba. Moving so close would defeat the point, though. If I was going to move, it had to be somewhere he’d never be able to find me. I should have picked an apartment building with a keycode on the exterior door. At this rate, the day I’d be able to pay Hiromi back for my tuition was just getting further and further away. And with the job hunt stuff, I didn’t even know how much longer I’d be able to keep working at *Étranger*. Right. Job hunting.

It felt like the totality of everything I had to do was chasing after me as I

stumbled.

As my mind started to wander from the intense feeling of exhaustion coming over me, I began thinking about Étranger again.

Richard was from a wealthy family in England. His cousin/older brother was some kind of star in the finance world. You could tell at a glance from his well-tailored suit that he came from money. I had to wonder what he would do if he found out that I worked for someone like that and he regularly treated me to 3,000 yen plus meals almost weekly. He lived like a sugar ant, collecting as much sugar as it could. I had no doubt that he'd try to use me to squeeze Richard for money.

I didn't want to see him even try to talk to Richard.

I didn't want to see the look of disgust on Richard's face.

The thought of having some stranger clawing at him over money after he'd finally gotten all that weight off his shoulders was the worst, though. He might be able to handle him just fine, but I couldn't bear it.

“.....”

I knew I would need to quit soon. But I wanted to get a bunch of things sorted first, like making him a tidier copy of my pudding recipe instead of the version I'd hastily scribbled out, and writing him an embarrassing letter to fully express my gratitude. Maybe I'd buy a new copy of my favorite recipe book from high school to give him, since he wasn't very good at cooking. They were all things that were kind of fun to daydream about when it was something far off in the future. A silly little flight of fantasy, even if a bit bittersweet, that served as a nice change of pace from time to time.

I never thought that time would actually come so quickly, though.

But I guess it was now. Admittedly, doing it now might seem a little too unnatural. I'd been telling him about how busy I was for a while, and I'd ended up canceling all of my phone-call English lessons with Professor Richard this week. I didn't think I'd have an opportunity to actually talk to him properly.

And that scared me.

Something about it terrified me so much I couldn't bear it. In my mind, I could just explain what that something was, but thinking about the specifics scared me. It felt like looking right at a bottomless swamp and being told to dive right in. I guess I'd be diving in regardless of whether I was looking at it or not, though.

My phone buzzed. It was a rare text from Saul. The message was brief.

"My idiot pupil is worried about you. Are you normal busy? Or hard-to-talk-about-it busy?"

He hit the nail right on the head with that question. Richard really did have a good sense for this sort of thing. And he was clever about his approach. He probably figured I wouldn't respond if he sent it himself. I guess I gave myself too much credit for that lie. I'd need to reflect on that.

I replied saying that it wasn't hard to talk about at all and that I just had a lot of stuff going on on the weekends—job-hunting information sessions and strategy meetings with my friends and stuff like that. And I added that I might need to quit soon. Saul was, as Richard had put it, a businessman first and foremost. He'd told me about his run-in with Richard in Sri Lanka, but he never seemed like an excessively warmhearted person to me. He seemed very pragmatic when it came to a lot of things. Of course, that wasn't my only reason, but I felt a little less bad lying to him than I would to Richard.

I didn't get a reply immediately, but eventually he responded with, *"Do you mind if I relay that to my pupil?"* That alone was enough to make me feel an uncontrollable urge to break out into tears because it reminded me that there were people out there that would reply to me like that. Not someone who would tell me there's something wrong with me, or that they don't want to hear it, or that I'm a bad kid. I wasn't dealing with someone uncommunicative who just wanted to completely squash me as a person, but someone who wanted to engage with me as another human being. This was someone who *asked me* if it was okay before revealing the contents of our conversation to someone else. *"Please do,"* I replied. That little exchange alone had made me feel so much better.

I wasn't getting much of anywhere with my studies or the job hunt, so I

packed up and returned to my apartment in Takadanobaba where I found a letter from my landlord.

Apparently the man who kept claiming to be my father had asked for a key to my apartment, saying he wanted to live with me. But his identification didn't have the family name Nakata anywhere on it, and without any confirmation from the tenant, my landlord just humored him. The note told me to get in contact if anything happened. I was appreciative, but only slightly. My landlord should have had Hiromi's contact information, and the thought of *him* trying to get in contact with her the same way he did to me made my heart sink. I immediately called the number she left with the note, explaining that I had no intention of letting him live with me, and asking her not to contact my mother because she had nothing to do with the situation. I apologized for the trouble, too. My landlord was a plucky older woman with motherly vibes who'd seen many foolish Kasaba students come and go over the years, and she was worried about me as well. I was grateful that she didn't ask me if he was really my father. I politely turned her down when she suggested going to the police. I'd go myself if that's the route I wanted to go, but I probably wouldn't be able to avoid dragging Hiromi into it if I did.

I froze in the entryway, looked over my studio apartment, and shuddered. If she had bought his story, he'd be in here 24/7. I'd installed the safe so it was hidden by the fridge, but he'd probably be desperate to open it somehow. There were gemstones inside—the aquamarine, the white sapphire, and other stones I'd bought from Richard, along with my bank book. I was so young, I was barely aware of much of anything when I knew him, but I'd heard that he had let his parents handle all his finances. He'd probably gotten by only because his mother was alive until recently. But now he'd lost his guardian, so he needed to find another roof to take shelter under. It gave me the creeps.

I wasn't studying economics for show. I knew that just as children aren't obligated to repay their parents' debt, they also have no obligation to support them financially, either. If he told me that he needed proof that there was no one to support him so he could go on welfare, I'd happily write something up to say that I have no intention of supporting him. But I doubt he'd go for that.

The more I wrestled with it, the more my mind started to fill with thoughts

that made me question my own humanity. I mean, I honestly never thought I'd do something like that stunt with the knife. But I did it. I bought the knife and I started counting. What would I have actually done if I'd gotten to zero?

Would I have—I mean, would I? Would I have really? Could I have done it?

“.....”

I decided to just take my shoes off for the time being. Just standing around in my room was boring. This has been happening to me a lot lately, though—where I'm just stuck thinking about something, unable to do anything else.

I wonder how much money it would take to get him to go away. He'd probably go away for a while at least, but he'd be back. It wouldn't actually solve anything. It'd probably have the opposite effect, honestly, and make him even more brazen. And what would I do *then*? Unfortunately, it wasn't the kind of problem an internet search could solve. Searching keywords like “nuisance parent” “drive off” and “money trouble” didn't net me any results. I was pretty sure there had to be some people out there struggling with the same issue I was, but internet search engines weren't advanced enough to find the answer to the question “what should someone in that position do?” from the sea of the internet.

I didn't remember eating lunch. It was no wonder I was hungry. I decided to make something to eat, but for some reason, my hands automatically started preparing royal milk tea instead. I'd brew some every so often on weekdays to give me a boost while studying, so I had all the ingredients on hand, and apparently, it was something I could manage on autopilot.

I made a big pot of tea and poured some into a mug. Fluffy clouds of steam wafted off of it. I hesitated a moment before taking a sip. It was delicious. It tasted like *Étranger*.

A voice somewhere in a corner of my heart whispered, “Wouldn't it be better if you didn't quit?” I wondered if he'd grant me a temporary leave of absence if I used the job hunt as an excuse. I wouldn't be making any money, of course, but I'd still be part of the shop. I felt like that would be easier for me to accept, emotionally speaking.

But even if I didn't do that, Richard had entrusted me with that sapphire. He'd

said I'd be holding on to it for him. It wasn't like our connection would be severed, even if I flat out quit, and I didn't think *he* wanted to cut contact with me, either.

"Then just quit already," another voice inside me countered. The timing just wasn't right. I wanted to resolve this mess and contact him to explain that a bunch of stuff happened but everything was fine now. Wasn't that for the best? That way I wouldn't cause him any trouble. But I had no way of knowing when that would be. There was a chance that he would pick up on my connection to the jewelry shop before then and start threatening to interfere with Richard's business. And that was the last thing I wanted to happen.

Either way, I had to stay away from Ginza for a while.

I didn't know which option was best. I would have liked to talk to Richard about it, but that would defeat the entire purpose of quitting. I'm pretty sure someone once said that all the truly important decisions in life are made alone. I guess this was just one of those moments—I was at a crossroads.

I thought about getting in contact with Richard, but I decided against it. I needed to come up with a plan. I would go into work one last time on Saturday, and then I'd finally come out with it and tell him I was too busy and couldn't keep working. He might ask me to stay for one more day, but I could just turn him down saying I had an information session to attend. And then I could just disappear. That would be for the best. Maybe I should at least tell him that I wouldn't be able to make it on Sunday in advance, though.

I took a deep breath—the act of breathing had never felt so bad before—and sent Richard a text telling him that I had an information session on Sunday, so I wouldn't be able to come in. I had started doing some exercise for the first time in a while when I got a reply.

"Understood."

It was shorter than I'd expected. I was relieved that he didn't ask any questions, but it was also kind of scary that he didn't. If he knew I didn't actually have plans and was planning to quit, he would be angry. Saul should have told him what I said earlier already, and I'd like to believe he believed it, too.

I made my oyster sauce vegetable stir-fry for the first time in ages that day. I

felt like cooking, but not like going out to buy anything, and that was about all I could make with what I had on hand.

I couldn't really tell if it'd turned out well or not. I'd probably been in junior high school the first time I'd felt this sticky texture on my tongue. The recipe was really just designed to cover up the blandness of the ingredients, but I'd given it my very best effort. I *liked* cooking. I liked not having to worry about the danger of leaving a knife out. I liked having plates that weren't broken, and not having to worry about plates going flying during meals. And I didn't have to live in fear of witnessing my mother's head being slammed into a wall because he decided to pick a fight.

Hiromi had done a good job protecting me. I'd only ever witnessed such a scene a few times, when I had to visit the Omiya house as part of the divorce formalities, but she'd told me there had been other variations on those incidents. I don't know how many times I'd heard about things like that happening. Enough to start growing numb to it. Hiromi had probably had the worst of it in the aftermath, when I was in junior high. Honestly, as a ten-year-old child, I'd wished over and over that she wouldn't tell me about things like that, but now...I could understand being in the state of mind where you just had to talk about it. We were comrades in arms.

Grandma would stroke my hair whenever Hiromi talked to me about such things, but she never once said that she pitied me. She told me that I was a strong kid. When someone as strong as my grandma told me that I was a strong kid, I felt like I could keep going.

Richard had Grandma's pink sapphire now.

I didn't feel lonesome without it. Tanimoto may have been my angel, but Richard was much the same. But if Tanimoto was an angel who floated through the air from time to time, Richard was an eccentric angel who had decided to walk the earth despite having wings. A devastatingly beautiful angel who was holding on to something I treasured.

And he'd still have it, no matter where I ended up going from here.

And he'd wait for me.

I don't think anything could make me happier. Even if it was all just in my

head, and even if I would never see him again in my life.

I slept well that night for the first time in ages. Maybe I had the royal milk tea to thank for that, though I supposed that would be kind of weird, considering its caffeine content. My eyes lowered, like the sugar melting into the tea on the stove, as I thought about the upcoming Saturday. I was confident I could pull it off.

“I brought you a present as a symbol of our reconciliation. You always did like sparkly things, didn’t you, Seigi?” the man said, offering me a clear plastic stone of the kind you might find at a 100-yen shop. It was blue with one pointed end. It was the kind of toy you might use as currency when playing house.

There’s no point in trying to have an actual conversation with someone who does nothing but suck the life out of you—it’ll only get them fired up while wearing you out. Did he really think the Seigi in his head would enjoy something like this?

I kept the door chain on as I opened my door, peering out the five-centimeter gap. The smiling man standing there hardly looked human to me. It was like a human-shaped meat sculpture.

“It’s five in the morning.”

“Yeah. Good morning. Will you let me in?”

“I’m calling the police. Leave. My landlord talked to me about you asking for a key.”

“But she didn’t give me one, even though my precious son’s home is my home, too.”

My glare didn’t seem to faze him one bit. I guess he was used to it. Threats only worked temporarily. They weren’t very effective if not repeated regularly. That was probably the same reason he routinely beat Hiromi.

“Go spout your bullshit in your dreams. I’m going to bed.”

“I don’t have anywhere to sleep. You’re so awful. I even brought you a gift, and this is how you treat me?”

I threw the blue stone back at him, and the man yelped. He just knocked again the moment I shut the door. My neighbors on either side were probably still sleeping. They were both students as far as I knew, but the extent of our relationship was saying hi once in a while. The voice kept calling, “Seigi, Seigi,” and I started to panic. I let out a bestial groan and pulled a 1,000-yen note from my wallet, opened the door, and tossed it through the gap. Bills don’t exactly toss well, though. I heard a little yelp for joy that I’d never heard him make before followed by brief grumbling about how it wasn’t very much, but finally he seemed to leave. Where did he get off complaining that it “wasn’t much”?

I was overwhelmingly exhausted. But you know, maybe it did make sense. In his mind, I was his caretaker, his wallet, and his home—so it was only natural to him that he be able to dip into my funds. All that 1,000 yen got me was a peaceful morning and intense feelings of helplessness and defeat.

I really needed to hurry up and move somewhere else.

It’d be nice if I could stay at a friend’s place before that, though. I definitely couldn’t stay with Hiromi. If I went to see her, he’d absolutely follow. But I didn’t have any friends I could explain the situation to and crash with. Plus, even if I could stay with someone for a bit, there was a good chance that man would follow, and that was beyond just an inconvenience. That plan was out. What about extended stay hotels aimed at traveling businessmen? That seemed like a better option. Either way, I needed to get packing.

I was in a daze from lack of sleep as I pulled out what few belongings I did have and laid them out on the floor. While I was sorting them into piles of things to take with me and things to throw away, I suddenly remembered something.

I guess this is what our family has always been like.

How many times had I gone to the Omiya house? I went with Hiromi when she said she was going to visit my father, but I distinctly remembered how from the very first time she looked like she was heading into battle. Maybe it was three times. I remembered my grandmother asking us to stay the night on a visit during the summer—we did fireworks in the yard—but I also remembered that late that night, he snapped at Hiromi and flipped a table over, so the two of

us left the house in the middle of the night. She could have had an agent pass the documents over to him, but Hiromi had a strong sense of personal responsibility and probably wanted to correct her own mistakes herself. And I was pretty sure that was the same reason she didn't just leave me in Grandma's care, either. She probably hated the idea of letting her mother—who she hated but also felt deeply indebted to—deal with the aftermath of her own failures.

I learned that there are some things that even hard work can't fix in elementary school. And Hiromi taught me that it wasn't an excuse to give up, because if you can't help yourself, no one else will.

Somehow it had gotten to be 7 a.m. while I was spacing out. I collapsed on the floor where I was and slept for about two hours. I didn't want to go to class. I kept remembering things I didn't want to remember. At the rate things were going, I had no confidence in my ability to look normal on Saturday. I wonder if I could stop by the cosmetics department of one of Ginza's famous department stores and ask one of the saleswomen to make me up. I frequently saw them at work when I was buying sweets. Made-up women dusting faces with various powders. If they asked me how I'd like to look, I think this is what I'd say: "Please make me look like a human being who's at least slightly alive." Because right now I didn't have any faith that I was even alive.

It pains me to feel grateful for this, but Saturday came without anything I had feared might happen actually happen. That man didn't try to contact me since that morning. But apparently he'd found one of my classmates from my exam prep class who was just as careless as me and got my phone number, so he'd just been calling me repeatedly. I immediately blocked his number, but he was using public pay phones and other mysterious numbers so there was no end to it. I'd been turning my phone off more often lately.

"Good morning."

"Indeed, good morning to you, too."

Things at *Étranger* were so normal, it almost seemed like an illusion. The shop was perfectly beautiful with its red lounge chairs and carpet. And our houseplant had gotten quite big—I'd repotted it into a larger pot for the first

time recently.

We bowed to each other before the shop opened. It was something every time, but it made me feel emotional because it would be the last time for me. That said, I intended to be especially enthusiastic today. I had to, otherwise I'd break down in tears or start acting weird. And that would torpedo my whole strategy.

"Man, I'm really sorry about tomorrow. It just completely blindsided me."

"You don't need to apologize. When I was working in Sri Lanka, I was often similarly taken by surprise by my mentor telling me we suddenly had a business meeting in three hours."

"Well, this isn't anything quite that rough..."

I needed to prepare the tea. We had four cartons of milk today, which meant there were a lot of appointments—Ms. Yonehara who was stopping by after visiting a sick family member in the hospital. Mr. Kamiyama who had taken a shine to a piece of hessonite and couldn't get it out of his head. An older man who liked to collect rare stones. A young man who was just starting to hit his stride in his career. And a woman around my age who was working her butt off at a financial firm.

It would get in the way of my ability to serve customers if I kept thinking about how this would be my last day. I was trying my best to act normal, but several customers had pointed out how tired I looked. Apparently, I'd failed to hide the dark circles under my eyes. Fortunately, I managed to smooth things over easily enough by saying I was busy looking for a long-term job.

My boss didn't say anything.

Richard used his silver tongue and his vast knowledge of gemstones to be the bridge between the stones and the customers as he sipped the royal milk tea I'd made. The tea snack for the day was pudding. I'd made some for tomorrow, too. I prayed that he wouldn't interfere with the little time I had left at the shop as I lowered the vessels full of pudding into the hot water—would I ever find myself doing this again as long as I lived? Probably not.

"How odd."

“...What’s odd?”

“Seigi.”

I turned around when I heard my name, but Richard didn’t say anything. He just looked at me. I wondered why. I wiped my face thinking maybe I had something stuck on it, but I didn’t find anything.

“What’s wrong?”

But all he gave me was a stare. Had he noticed something.

“...Did you change your hair?”

“No.”

“Oh, new clothes perhaps?”

“They are new, but they’re from the same place I always go to. I don’t think there’s anything special about them.”

What was he seeing? I couldn’t tell. I wanted some kind of hint, but I was struggling to think because I hadn’t gotten much sleep and looking at Richard’s face too long made me feel like crying. I averted my eyes and smiled lethargically.

“No hints?”

“...Well, never mind.”

Thank goodness.

I put on a brave face and held myself together until the last appointment of the day, Ms. Yasuhara, finally arrived. She was looking for a tanzanite pendant. The blue stone had a checkerboard cut that made it sparkle, but it had a very modern, fashionable look to it—it reminded me of ice rolling around in a glass of alcohol. It was a faint purple, like the color of the sky at twilight—I think they call this color ultramarine. She would probably be the last customer of the day—my last customer.

“Tanzanite sure is an easy name to remember. It comes from Tanzania, right?”

“Precisely. But that isn’t actually its scientific name.”

“It’s not?”

Richard explained that the mineral already had a name—blue zoisite. But for those with some familiarity with gemstones, the name *zoisite* evoked images of pale yellowish-green and soft purple stones, or even ruby-zoisite where it’s mixed with ruby. *I see*. It was a stone that came in many colors.

“This ultramarine-colored zoisite does come from a mine in Tanzania, but it was given the trade name by a large American jewelry corporation. Although it’s only been about a half a century since its discovery, thanks to its mystical blue color and an easy-to-remember name that makes it clear where it came from, it’s become extraordinarily popular.”

Richard concluded that it was much rarer to hear people call blue zoisite, zoisite. Where exactly is Tanzania anyway? I think it’s off the southern coast of Africa. I hadn’t been able to focus on my studies for the civil service exam at all lately—I’d been too busy preparing to move. I’d planned to rent an extended stay room in Uguisudani, but moving all my stuff was going to be a pain. I told my landlord I’d be away for a bit, but I had to explain a little of what was going on to justify it. I hoped she’d keep quiet about it to Hiromi.

“This particular color is evocative of the sky just on the brink of twilight, wouldn’t you agree? Tanzanite is said to aid in starting a new life. It’s associated with the terms ‘secrecy,’ ‘improved judgment,’ and ‘rebirth’—a stone bursting with mysterious charm.”

“Rebirth, huh? I take it you tend to take a more new-age approach when talking about stones here. I’m not a huge fan myself.”

“I adjust my approach to match my customer’s preferences. The term *new age* is nearly as new as the name tanzanite, but humanity’s relationship with gemstones is extremely ancient. The more well known a stone becomes, the more stories build up around it. As time passes, those stories may end up coming together to form the notion that these stones have some mystical healing power. But fundamentally, the power these stones have is their unbreakable bond with humanity.”

“Oh, I see what you’re saying. We’ve treasured gemstones since ancient times, so even without specifically invoking ‘new age’ philosophies, they still

have those sorts of elements in their histories.”

“Precisely. You are very wise, Ms. Yasuhara.”

“Ahaha, Well...I certainly can’t deny the power of beauty.”

The customer glanced at Richard’s face for a moment before bashfully looking toward me. My beautiful boss politely pretended not to notice. This sort of thing happened often at Étranger. Apparently one of her friends had recommended the shop to her. She would probably be back. She didn’t end up buying the stone, but she seemed to respond well to the sales pitch.

But I guess I would never find out.

“Nice work today.”

“Indeed, you did well, too.”

This was it.

All the days I’d spent with Richard in Étranger since last spring would end here.

Everything was so normal, it was hard to believe it.

It felt almost like the beautiful dream I was having would go on forever.

When I really thought about it, it was still hard to believe that I was working at a jewelry shop in Ginza of all places. How had I been working at a place like that for such a long time? It’s still crazy even if you buy that it all happened on a whim of the store’s manager. No. No, I can’t let myself get emotional. I’ll start tearing up. It’s not like Étranger was going anywhere. I wouldn’t be punished for checking to see if the shop was still here every so often.

“Uh, um...”

My voice was oddly hoarse sounding. Richard looked at me with no strong emotion on his face. He was sitting in one of the lounge chairs after seeing the customer off and exchanging his last bow with me. It was just before 6 p.m. I had plenty of time. No need to rush. But it was now or never.

“Um, so, I told you I wasn’t coming in tomorrow, right?”

“I do recall that.”

“And, um, it seems like I’m gonna be super busy on the weekends from now on.”

“Indeed it does.”

“...Would you let me resign?”

I said it. I said it. I actually said it. My heart was flailing. But there was nothing else I could do. If I kept working here, I was definitely going to bring trouble with me. And that man didn’t care about how much trouble he might cause me. He would follow me anywhere. And I didn’t want that.

Or at least, that was what I told myself.

Really, this was an issue of pride for me. Richard thought highly of me, and I didn’t want to disappoint him as I became a worse and worse person.

Richard didn’t say anything. His cup was already empty. But I got no “I see” or “This is rather sudden.” He just stared at me.

“When?”

“Huh?”

“I asked you when you intend to stop coming in.”

I told him it would probably be tomorrow, giving him the answer I’d prepared. I was braced for him to scold me for being hasty, but Richard’s response was just, “I see. I suppose that makes this our last day here together.”

“...I guess it might.”

Not “might.” It was. I was pretty sure I was the one who least wanted to accept that reality, but I had to. Richard’s expression never changed, but he was silent a long time before he continued.

“Then shall we go out to eat tonight?”

“...Today? Now?”

“Yes. I think it might make me rather teary-eyed to call it a farewell party. So, let’s make it a nice memory.”

I couldn’t help but smile at those words. I could feel my lips contort into the shape, but it felt odd to me. It felt like the first time I’d smiled in a hundred

years. With that settled, Richard briskly set about cleaning up. Even if this was our last day together, I guess there was no time for sentimentality.

I was sure we'd be going to Shiseido Parlor. I wondered how many times I'd been there now? Probably dozens at this point. I couldn't think of anywhere better to close out this chapter of my life.

Or so I assumed—but when Richard closed up shop, he briskly made his way to the parking lot where his Jaguar was parked and had me get in the passenger seat before taking off down Chuo-doori. I wondered where we were going. I asked the driver, but my beautiful boss didn't answer. I guess I was in no position to be upset, considering what I'd dropped on him at the last minute. But I couldn't read any emotion from Richard's face. I felt like I'd seen him make this face once before. While I was trying to place it, we got onto the Shuto Expressway, and then got off again before arriving in a neighborhood that was probably not very used to having Jaguars driving around it.

I'd been here just once before. I'd been sent on a mission for mango mousse and passion fruit cream buns. That felt like forever ago now. There was a foreign-owned hotel there. It towered over its surroundings in the night sky.

"Shall we?"

"...Huh? We're getting out here?"

"It's just as famous for its restaurant as it is for its sweets."

He stopped in front of the building. The suit-clad jeweler quickly entrusted the car to the valet, then strode briskly into the hotel. He said he had a reservation under Ranasinghe. The woman at the front desk greeted us, showed us to the elevator, and pushed the up button. Richard didn't say a word to me. It felt like he was going to scold me, but the next moment it seemed more like he was about to crack his usual broad smile.

When we got to the thirty-sixth floor, a restaurant with an incredible view was waiting for us. There was a cooler stacked high with bottles of champagne against one of the purple velvet walls. You could see Tokyo Tower sparkling off in the distance through the windows. They had thoughtfully kept the lighting rather low, making it hard to see the faces of the other customers. It seemed a bit more like a bar than a restaurant.

“Hey, remember, no drinking and driving.”

“I’m not drinking. Well, I may indulge in a non-alcoholic cocktail or two. What about you? Champagne? Don’t hold back.”

“I, uh...I’d rather refrain from alcohol.”

The only thing holding me together in that moment was my self-control. I wasn’t particularly a lightweight, but if I overindulged, I’d definitely make a fool of myself. I couldn’t ruin my strategy. My mission today was to leave Richard with at least somewhat of a good memory of me.

I could do this. It would be my crowning achievement as a part-timer at *Étranger*. Time to put on a performance of having a pleasant dinner.

I thought it’d be nice to order some curry or an omelet rice to give me some energy, but I didn’t even need to order. Richard apparently had a full course menu prepared. After they took our orders for drinks at the start, the food just kept coming out automatically. From some kind of fish garnished with tiny tomatoes and sauce, to an asparagus soup jelly—every dish was like an edible jewel. Everything was so cohesively designed, right down to the plates it was served on. The extreme attention to detail almost made it seem like designer jewelry. It must have been an incredibly expensive restaurant. And every bite was delicious.

I liked Shiseido Parlor, but trying to imagine anything else as delicious as this stretched some long-unused mental muscles. I felt like I was being healed from the inside out. What even was this?

“...I have no words.”

“Do you now?”

“If you’re the Emperor of Sweets *and* you eat delicious stuff like this all the time, that can’t be good, can it? I know I’m in no position to criticize, but I mean for your health.”

“Thank you, I’ll be sure to be careful.”

“Well, I sure hope so.”

Richard briefly flashed me a happy smile.

“I see you’re a bit more yourself now.”

“Huh?”

“Steak’s up next. If you’re full, I’ll eat it for you.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be thinking about your health? I’ll make myself eat it if I have to.”

We laughed together for the first time in ages as we ate the meat we were served. It was delicious. So delicious. I felt like I might drop my guard and start crying, but maybe I could pass it off as crying because the food was just too good. No, I wasn’t even drinking, I couldn’t let myself get carried away by the atmosphere.

There was a small palate cleanser, a gorgeous dessert, and a second dessert for good measure. I guess the sweets I’d bought at the hotel before were produced by this restaurant, so it was no wonder that they were delicious. While we were enjoying our full course meal, the scenery outside had become pitch black. My phone was off, but it’d probably be ringing about now if I’d left it on. He always started calling in the morning and in the evening. Just the thought of it made my stomach feel like it was full of lead. I frantically tried to put on a smile.

“That was sooo good. Thank you, Richard, seriously.”

I really wanted to say, “Thank you, for the last time.” But I felt like I might break if I said it, so I didn’t. Richard replied, “It was nothing,” with a warm smile. Looking at Richard with the night sky behind him was...how to put it—

Kind of—

Sort of—

No. I couldn’t come up with a single word. And I had the feeling that the moment anything came out of my mouth, everything I’d been holding in would come flooding up with it.

Richard hadn’t even touched his water or his soft drink when he got up from his chair, urging me to do the same with the gesture, as if he couldn’t bear to watch me sitting there, groping around for words. Then we got back on the

elevator. I figured this was finally really it. I felt a bit like I was watching the credits of an entertaining movie, when Richard got off on the third floor. It was dark, but what I could see in front of us was a real bar counter this time.

Richard strode over to the counter without hesitation. A couple was standing next to us, enjoying a moment together. I felt like we stuck out like a sore thumb.

“Richard, are we really going in there?”

“This bar serves delicious chocolate.”

“You’re still hungry? Seriously? Are you sure you’re okay? Did you fast yesterday or something?”

“I let loose every once in a while, too, you know.”

“Well, I guess that food was good enough to make you want to lose control...”

Richard ignored me, ordering a Saratoga cooler for himself and a Shirley Temple for me. They were both non-alcoholic cocktails. The bartender got to work, but this didn’t really seem like the place to be enjoying soft drinks and chocolate.

Actually.

“Richard, did you, um, pay?”

“No, I charged it to my room.”

“You’re staying here?!”

I nearly blurted out something about how impossible this place must be to afford, but I held it back. I guess money meant different things to different people, and an expensive hotel was a kind of security money could buy. Come to think of it, neither the people at the bar nor the restaurant had been shocked by Richard’s beauty. I’d assumed it was just because it was a fancy restaurant, but it made more sense if they were used to seeing him because he was staying here.

“Are you going to have any?”

The cube-shaped pieces of chocolate sitting on the little white plate looked

rich and delicious, but I wasn't very interested in eating. And it wasn't because I'd eaten so much earlier. It was more that I was prepared to go back to the real world, but the guillotine blade was being held back until the very last second, testing my patience. To be honest, I felt an impulse to just kick my chair away and run. I wanted to shout, "Just leave me alone!"

No. No. I had to make Richard happy today. I had to make my best effort to look happy myself.

"Thanks. I'll have one."

I chewed up the expensive chocolate, the flavor of which I couldn't quite identify, and washed it down with my sweet cocktail. I felt like I was swallowing fire. The man next to us was very obviously trying to seduce the woman he was with. I wished they would do that somewhere else. I felt compelled to interrogate them. "Are you okay?" "You're not the kind of man who would hit your wife once she has kids, right?"

There was still chocolate left. I popped another one in my mouth to conceal my ragged breaths.

"These are so delicious. I almost hate to finish them."

"Me too."

"Hm?"

"I just don't want to."

"...What are you talking about?"

"I don't want to let you leave."

Huh?

I couldn't really tell what Richard was saying. I turned away from him. The couple in my field of view seemed a bit taken aback. I probably should have been looking over at Richard. *They* were probably looking at Richard.

The beautiful man, sitting cross-legged on his barstool with an elbow on the counter, slipped his hand into his jacket pocket and pulled it out again. He took a plastic card from his business card case. Oh, right. A key card. Hotels these days don't use metal keys but these electronic ones. I understood that.

What I didn't understand was what Richard was trying to tell me.

"Should I say it again?"

"Um...was that directed at me just now?"

"Is there anyone else here?"

"...No."

"Then perhaps it was directed at you."

"Good point."

"Indeed. Shall we?" Richard encouraged me to get up. I assumed he was asking if I wanted a ride back in the Jaguar. His tone was very light. I still had no idea what he was talking about, but my primary objective for today was to complete the crowning achievement of my part-time career. I wanted to give Richard a good parting memory, even if it wasn't real. I didn't have the option to say no to whatever he suggested. My answer had been decided for me.

"What floor?"

"You'll find out if you follow me."

Right. That made sense.

I felt like I was being thrown a massive bone right before my execution as I got into the elevator again, went to an upper floor, and followed the besuited man. Richard never looked back at me. A hallway without very many doors opened up before us. I was sure each of the individual rooms had to be massive. Was he really staying here? I bet Saul would have picked someplace cheaper.

Richard came to a stop in front of the room at the end of the hall and looked at me.

"After you," he said in English, handing me the keycard. One of the travel guides I'd read before my trip to England had a point about making sure no one was behind you before you opened your hotel door. Apparently, there were robbers who would hit you on the back of the head and get into the room after you. What a weird thing to remember. This was Richard's room, after all.

I put the key in the door and swiped it. The green light turned on.

The door opened. It was very heavy, making it feel almost excessively serious of a gesture.

And on the other side was...

“Surprise! Haven’t seen you in ages, buddy! It’s the lover of Wall Street, the irresistible English gentleman, Jeffrey Claremont.”

“Whoa.”

“Jeff, you’re going to scare him.”

“He looks like he’s seen a ghost.”

“Whoa, wah...”

“He’s panicking. Ricky, grab him.”

“Already ahead of you.”

I took a step back to try to run when Richard got me into an arm lock and dragged me into the room. I never would have expected Jeffrey to show up here. He was wearing a suit that looked a lot like Richard’s, and the playboy air he usually had about him was more subdued. He looked like someone putting on an expensive suit for their final interview. I started to wonder just how many square meters the room was. It wasn’t just a single room, either. The bath and toilet were in separate rooms, and there was a parlor to boot. The room I could see in the back was probably a bedroom, but it had a writing desk. I was pretty confident 20,000 yen a night wouldn’t begin to cover it.

Richard sat me down in one of the chairs in the parlor and Jeffrey clapped me on the shoulders.

“What is going on? You scared me. Whoa...”

“That’s my line. What were you thinking? I need to take this call... Yes, hello? Are you the driver? I’ve received confirmation from the landlord. Go ahead and deliver it as planned.”

“D-driver?”

“You tried to book an extended-stay hotel room, didn’t you? Well, we’ve canceled that for you. It would be silly to spend money on a hotel room you

won't be using, after all."

"...What?"

"Maybe you've forgotten, but I spent quite a long time stalking you within the realm of what's legal, of course. Obviously, I've repented of my actions—please, God, forgive me for my trespasses. And since I've repented, I hope you'll forgive me for reoffending. It's plain for anyone to see that something's been eating at you."

"Jeff."

"Fine, fine. Take your time. I'll be outside if you need anything."

He waved goodbye and left the room. Richard retrieved the keycard from my hands and tucked it back into his breast pocket. He pulled over another upholstered chair with carved legs and sat down in front of me.

"I don't understand."

"That's my line. Why didn't you talk to me?"

"Huh? Uh? What? Why is Jeffrey here?"

"He's the one who brought this to me. He said he wanted to talk and that it might be an emergency."

He had gotten a text from Jeffrey, who was like something of an older brother to him. Richard didn't know what he was talking about, so he reluctantly called him, where he was met with a deluge of information. He explained that his part-timer at *Étranger* was being followed around by someone and that someone happened to be his biological father. If that was last week, he must have noticed immediately after he made his initial contact with me. What the hell? Was I living in a glass box? There was no way. Or so I'd thought.

"I will refrain from commenting on how it's in poor taste to spy on people, as Jeffrey has promised to make a sincere apology to you later. He is quite something, isn't he? Now, as for this Shimeno person."

Why was his name coming up here? I sat there, so quiet I might as well have been holding my breath, and Richard retrieved a folder from the writing desk and handed it to me. It was full of enlarged photos. A shot of him and I talking,

some of him alone in some area in Takadanobaba in the morning, and then pictures of a race track. Did he go to the races after I gave him that 1,000-yen bill? But the thing that really exhausted me was the fact that the performance I'd been so frantically trying to keep up had meant nothing in the end.

I glared up at Richard from my seat. Wasn't this a little cruel? The beautiful man just shrugged.

"And you didn't say a word to me, either. I think we're square now."

"What are you talking about? I 'didn't say a word to you'? You wouldn't have wanted to hear about any of this."

"I'm shocked to hear that from the man who flew to London at the drop of a hat." Richard stood there in front of me, so beautiful that I felt wrong for sitting in his presence, and called me by my full name. "Seigi Nakata."

"...What?"

"You strike me as a twisted mirror of a person. I used to despise mirrors. They made me hate my face as it grew more similar to my mother's by the day. But you are a different sort of mirror. The circumstances of our births and childhoods couldn't be more different, yet the very cores of our souls are excessively similar. So perhaps it is my job to say this to you."

Richard grabbed my shoulders, both of them. It was a little scary. I froze as he drew closer, hanging over me.

"I love you. I love you so much, I can't help myself. And that's why I'm angry with you to a similar degree."

"....."

"Why do you treat me like some rock on the side of the road? What do you think I am? A doll that's not good for anything but being on display? I've been on this Earth longer than you have. I possess more knowledge than you, and I have enough free time to be able to afford to spend some on you. And yet you had the audacity to try to abandon me and walk off into the darkness. It's beyond asinine and irrational. English people do not appreciate irrationality. So tell me, why are you treating me this way?"

I was pretty sure this qualified as a verbal beatdown. I had no room to object to anything he said. But it wasn't like I hadn't thought about it. Even I knew how sharp Richard could be. And I did actually think about how to react if he asked me if I'd gotten myself into some sort of trouble or something.

I had thought about it, but none of those thoughts were of any use against him suddenly going right for my heart. I was stumped.

But I couldn't just keep silent forever. I began to speak in fragments,

"...Sometimes even if you love someone...or rather *because* you love someone, you can't go to them for help..."

"I don't understand. You and I are very different people who were born and raised under different circumstances and in vastly different countries. The barrier to mutual communication for us is much greater to overcome than it would be for you and your relatives or one of your school friends, so I am demanding a *logical* explanation."

That was rich, coming from him. I don't really know anyone as talented as Richard at reaching right into all sorts of people's hearts. No, maybe talent isn't really the right word to describe this sort of thing. You can't know what people are thinking from the start. The difference is whether you turn around at that point and give up, or if you keep pounding on that door, even if it annoys them, until you get your opportunity. I was confident he was someone who loved people. Just as much as he loved gemstones.

He wouldn't be so kind to me if he didn't.

"...You know, that steak was extremely delicious."

"It was."

For a moment, I thought I wouldn't mind if I died after eating that. I mean, eating such delicious food at such an incredible restaurant while sitting across from Richard—now that was heaven. It felt like the sort of place you'd never find yourself in unless you died.

"...I guess eating delicious food helps people relax, huh?"

"I would have preferred to have treated you to your usual curry or omelet

rice, but distance to our destination presented an issue.”

I see, so bringing me here was all part of the plan. The Shiseido Parlor in Ginza definitely didn’t have anything that’d work as an interrogation room like this. This was anything from a crowning achievement of mine—I was the target getting led around by the nose. I couldn’t say a word.

Richard’s eyes were deadly serious. It was really difficult to keep secrets from him. Gemstones may not speak, but I believed that beauty had a way of judging people. Stones repeatedly ask their owners, “Are you worthy of my beauty?” And for the first time in that moment, I felt Richard possessed a similar quality. He was such a good performer, he was probably trying to make me feel that way on purpose. He was desperately trying to keep his tender side hidden.

When I couldn’t take it anymore, I opened my mouth.

“...Um, so, my father’s a giant piece of shit.”

“Do you mean that in the sense that he’s been a great nuisance because he’s been pestering his biological son for money and repeatedly threatening him where he lives?”

That did about cover the specific offenses he’d committed against me recently. But that wasn’t the main reason I called him that. Beauty may judge people, but I didn’t feel like telling Richard everything. How much would I have to tell him for him to forgive me? There was a large dam inside my heart, and what it was holding back wasn’t water but sludge. And I didn’t want any of that getting on Richard. It’s the sort of thing that you let out into a drainage ditch in secret.

“He’s had more of an impact on me than you can imagine. Calling him a loser is too generous...he’s more of the ‘better off without him’ variety.”

“Am I to understand that to mean that you are predisposed to repeating socially unacceptable disruptive behaviors?”

“.....”

He was a man who could stride right up to your heart in one swift move. If Richard’s words at *Étranger* were a feather duster, the words he was using here were a machete. He was slicing every nonessential word off what I’d said,

whittling it down to a simple branch. All to confirm the true nature of the trouble I was hiding from him with his expert appraiser's eye.

"I think it's better if I quit working at Étranger. He really doesn't think about anyone but himself. You can't apply your usual standards to him. You can't get through to him. He won't listen to anything you say and just interprets it in a way that's convenient for him. Just talking to him is exhausting."

"It's clear from the documentation that he has extremely 'unique' communication skills. But the question of whether you resign from working at my shop has nothing to do with him. Or your job hunt for that matter. Why is that? I desire an explanation."

Even if I kept quiet, Richard wasn't going to wait. His blue eyes were focused entirely on me and me alone. The more I thought about it, the more I started to realize what a luxury I was being treated to. The most beautiful man in the world, who was so kind it could bring you to tears, was devoting himself entirely to me. I felt indulged, like a baby being rocked to sleep in a cradle. I felt like something was about to break. I didn't think I could keep going, but the master communicator wasn't going to overlook even a momentary crack.

"Well, if you don't want to explain it to me, fine, but you're making me feel very lonesome."

Richard pouted. That wasn't the right expression to be making right now, but it was too late by the time I realized what he was up to. I couldn't hold back a smile.

"You're *lonesome*? What's that supposed to mean? That's not the kind of situation we're in right now, is it? Come on, you had this harsh atmosphere going and everything. You can be really crafty sometimes, you know?"

"Am I now?"

"You are. I know you start thinking about sweets sometimes when you're talking to customers."

"Perhaps I do at times, but you can tell?"

"Sometimes when you say, 'Is that so?' I catch your eyes darting about for just a moment. I can always tell that means you're getting hungry."

“You aren’t wrong, but I’ve never found it to be an issue. No one has ever pointed it out before you did, and I suspect that will continue to be the case.”

“You really are a weirdo.”

“I could say the same of you.”

“Yeah, maybe...ahh...aw, man...you really are a magician.”

“I am merely human, just like you. A tiny, insignificant creature on this planet. And I was rather scared today. You weren’t acting like yourself.”

“...You really are beautiful. So beautiful, it’s hard to believe.”

I shook my head as I stared at Richard’s face, and he patted me on the head. I’d been crying for a bit now, so it didn’t feel like he was telling me not to cry. If I counted it up, I’ve cried in front of him four times now. But this was the first time I didn’t want to look away from him as I did. I only realized it now—when my hands were full with my own problems, Richard’s beauty didn’t reach me. It wasn’t the same as being used to it. He was beautiful to me, no matter how many times I looked at him.

Richard had said that people have the power to make stones into gems. I wondered if the opposite was true, too. Perhaps if a gemstone’s beauty seemed to wane, it’s an issue with the viewer.

I wanted to keep holding out a little longer, but I was up against a very dastardly opponent. He had me beat. I couldn’t hide it anymore.

“...I haven’t told anyone about this, not even Hiromi.”

“I will keep your secrets. This room is soundproof, so even our little wannabe MI6 agent out there won’t hear.”

“Thanks.”

In the time it took me to say “um” about ten times, I had dived right into the sludge. It was like a congealed mass of memories. I was fighting my way upstream with all my might, struggling to breathe. But I wouldn’t be able to explain anything if I didn’t make my way there.

The memory that came up was of me, visiting a library when I was in elementary school.

“...Did I ever tell you about how he was a wife-beater?”

“I believe you may have touched on it very briefly before.”

“So, I was a kid, right? So I thought about it like a little kid would and wondered why he hit Hiromi.”

I mean, it was weird, right? Hiromi hadn't done anything wrong—they didn't even seem to have a connection that a normal human relationship could be built off of in the first place—so what reason could he have had to hit someone who may as well have been a total stranger to him? I couldn't understand it at all. I'd learned that you shouldn't just leave it at that if you don't understand something, so I went to the library to do some research. I used keywords like “domestic violence,” “abuse,” and “marriage problems.” It was difficult material for an elementary schooler, but since I wasn't the type to read for fun, looking back on it now, I'm pretty sure it contributed to boosting my language grades.

The local library didn't seem especially well stocked, but while I was doing research, I came across a book. I now realized it was probably a translation since it was laid out horizontally.

When I opened the book, I didn't realize I would be reading a book of prophecy.

“Wives are more frequently the victims of domestic violence, and children are often witnesses to it. And, um...the book had data from follow-up surveys done on children who had witnessed domestic violence. I guess the book was by some American doctor... There was a lot of complicated stuff in there...”

It was a legitimate book, I don't think anything that was written in it was untrue.

The book said that, “Children who witnessed domestic violence growing up were 25 percent more likely to become violent with their spouses in the future than their peers who did not.” That was specifically about boys who had witnessed violence in the home. Girls who had witnessed violence in the home, according to the book, were more likely to be the victims of violence compared to their peers. When I read that, somewhere deep in my heart, I wished I'd been born a girl.

“I was really shocked when I read that...but I figured, if it was in a book, it must be true. And it’s not like it didn’t resonate on some level...”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, reasons aside, do you think a respectable person would crash into someone else’s house and start throwing priceless gemstones around?”

That side of me had always been there. I’m pretty sure Hiromi had me start and stick with karate because I’d developed a habit of randomly kicking walls. I didn’t remember any of it very well, but she’d been nearing the end of her rope with me putting holes in the walls of the apartment we were renting and refusing to listen to her. And it worked like a charm—starting martial arts put a stop to it. I got well acquainted with how much power my fists had, along with learning the painful lesson of what kind of unintended accidents accompanied punching and kicking like that. It made me not want to cause trouble like that on purpose anymore. That experience was an important one that, for good or for ill, taught me how I measured up.

But somewhere deep down in my heart, like a smoldering ember, was a desire to destroy things that didn’t go my way. Sometimes, you don’t get your way. Sometimes people are annoying. But the real question was, if it did that, who was it that would be destroyed? Me, maybe? Or maybe someone no one would miss if they were gone?

I hadn’t always thought that way. It was after I’d read that “book of prophecy” that I began to have thoughts like that.

Before I got married to someone in the future and started hitting them.

In a sense, that incident with the white sapphire was a perfect match for my impulses.

“I think my desire to be a knight in shining armor...to be a *good person*... comes from a desire to be good in the eyes of the people I love. And...once I become a ‘good person’...I want to disappear. I feel like if I’m with someone for too long, they’ll find out what’s inside me. And I don’t want that. Maybe that’s a little too vain of me, but I can’t help it. That’s just the kind of person I am. Yeah...that’s how it should be...”

I didn't want the people I loved to hate me.

I thought I fell in love with people about as much as anyone did. But my feelings weren't the same as other people's. They may look beautiful on the surface, but what lay underneath didn't match. If you dove under the surface, you'd see it's nothing but gooey, rotten flesh. Anyone might be able to enjoy the clear waters on top, but I doubt anyone would be able to understand what lay in the depths. It would be really terrifying for me if my feelings fit with someone else's like a jigsaw puzzle piece.

Because I just know if that were to happen, I'd end up hitting them. I know my true nature better than anyone. But that's just what being a perfect match for me would mean.

I doubt there's anyone in the world who would enjoy being beaten. I know that better than anyone. But I was someone who took joy in hitting people. Or at least, there was a good chance that I was.

I let out a deep sigh and then went silent. I felt the air move. Richard was looking at me.

"Seigi Nakata."

"...Yes?"

"You should not work at Étranger."

Those words pierced my heart. I must have been making an awful face. Richard flashed me a look as if to say, "No."

"Do you remember the conditions you agreed to when I hired you? It was a lengthy list of principles."

"Huh?"

Is that what he meant? Of course I remembered them.

"That I'm not to 'hold prejudiced views or make discriminatory remarks on the basis of a person's race, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, or any other quality.'"

Richard had added that it was the bare minimum courtesy of treating other people as human. Richard's standards for humanity were a lot higher than mine

had been, but that's what made him so incredible. And what made me want to be like him.

"You're a bigot. It may have been a mistake to hire you."

"Huh?"

A cold light sparkled in Richard's eyes. His pale skin seemed to glow almost like a pearl. Why did Richard's beauty enchant me even when he was telling me things like this? He really was beautiful. Bigot though? Me?

"I-I... Is it because I keep calling you beautiful?"

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"Speaking hypothetically," Richard began, "Long long ago, there lived a college student with a strong sense of justice. And one day, by pure happenstance, he rescued a jeweler who was being harassed by a group of drunks. The two of them became fast friends. Let's say that one day, the jeweler suddenly became very cold and distant to the college student. When the college student asked him why he was acting that way and if something had happened, the jeweler responded thusly: 'I have a secret, which I have long kept from you—my father was a horrible person, and thus I, too, am a horrible person. That is why we should not remain close any longer.' The college student argued back that nothing he had said made the slightest bit of sense and asked the jeweler what had caused him to harbor such dogmatic beliefs. But the jeweler simply shook his head, defeated, and said, 'That is simply who I am.' Now, what should I call the issue that exists between them in this scenario? 'Prejudice,' perhaps? Or 'bigotry'?"

Wait. What?

I understood what he was trying to say. I was pretty sure I knew what he was getting at by reversing our positions, but was that really bigotry? I mean, I wasn't *just* his son, I was a child who witnessed his own father committing domestic violence. People like that have a higher probability of being violent themselves. That was just what the numbers said. Is that still bigotry, then?

I looked at Richard as if to ask him if he was being serious, and he returned my gaze, his eyes just as serious.

“Perhaps this example will be more liable to make sense to you: Many of my relatives in the seventh Earl of Claremont’s time found it quite natural not to think of persons of color as human. They did not consider them to be living beings with the same standing as they had. And both Jeff and I inherited the same blood that ran through those bigots’ veins. Consequently, there is a high probability that I possess a latent proclivity to not consider *you* human. Yet, have I not developed a close relationship with you?

“What do you say to that?” Richard concluded.

No, come on, that’s totally different.

“If you have a strong predisposition to bigotry, then I’m pretty sure pretty much every human on the planet has the latent potential to be an extreme racist...and that would be pretty bad.”

“What a coincidence, I was thinking much the same thing. You are none other than the person who shows such sensitive consideration to others, the person who has—with but one exception—never treated gemstones violently, the person who has been using the exact same bag that you’ve had since you started working at *Étranger* over a year ago with great care. So tell me, how is it that you feel—no, *believe* that you are a crude and hopeless person? I cannot begin to understand it. I have no explanation other than prejudice.”

I was silent, except for a single “but” in response. I didn’t continue the thought beyond that. Richard picked up from there and continued,

“Your assertion that a child who witnesses their father committing domestic violence is assured to form an unhappy family in the future is beyond ludicrous. Your intolerance doesn’t just affect you. It’s an affront to every single child who survived similar circumstances.

“It’s inexcusable,” he tacked on. And before I could even open my mouth, he continued.

“You are demeaning yourself on the basis of the circumstances of your birth, and all without realizing how many other people you’re hurting in the process.”

Then Richard sank down, placing his hands on my shoulders. His face was so close to mine, I could feel the power of his beauty. “Do you understand?” the

beautiful man said, looking me right in the eye.

“Seigi, you need to remember this because it’s very important: If you cannot treat yourself with kindness, you will never be able to treat others with kindness. Even if you try to be kind to others all the while holding a blade to yourself, that kindness will always be temporary. Any happiness that is born of your sorrow is meaningless to those you love.”

“I’m not asserting that every child in that situation will end up creating an unhappy family. I’m not saying it’ll happen to *everyone*. But I—”

“Yes, exactly. Why is it that you are willing to extend that grace to others, but you have so little faith in yourself?”

Yeah. Well that’s because...because...I don’t know. Because I’m his son. Because I know the darkness in my heart. But—

This was the first time I’d ever considered that maybe this wasn’t just about me.

When I fell silent, Richard lowered his voice a bit and began to talk again.

“After hearing what you said earlier, I finally understand why you can compliment me over and over.”

“...Why I *can* compliment you?”

“Exactly. It’s not something just anyone can do,” Richard declared, his tone was neither one of praise nor disparagement.

“All people grow accustomed to the things they’re around all the time. Even if I am, as you say, the most beautiful person in the world, seeing me every week would make me just ‘normal.’ And yet, you continue to compliment me. How is that possible?”

I’d never even thought that far. It was just because Richard was beautiful, no matter how many times I’d seen him. Or at least that’s what I thought, but I guess he was suggesting it was something else.

“You don’t think of me as normal or expected. You don’t think of me as tangible, something that is always by your side. That is why I remain someone distant and unreachable to you. It is almost as if we are ferrymen, captaining

different boats on the same river—while you may continue to wave and call out to me, you never attempt to get on the same boat. You never attempt to close the distance between us. And you never allow me to pay your price, the affection, you are worth.”

And then Richard waved to me. His gestures were so beautiful, it was almost like a dance. I didn’t know why, but for some reason that made me feel intensely alone. Richard had probably felt similarly. I looked away, and Richard sighed, saying that he’d gotten off topic.

“Ultimately, this isn’t an issue of probabilities and statistics, it’s an issue of your courage and preferences. Which would you prefer to put faith in? Statistics, which act like a rope around your neck that gives you just enough slack to run freely around the yard, which indicate there’s a chance there may be darkness in your soul, or me, the person who believes in your limitless potential.”

“Make your choice,” Richard demanded.

“Additionally, allow me to give you a piece of elementary mathematical knowledge that is absolutely indispensable for understanding statistics: No matter what you multiply zero by, you will never get any result other than zero. Conversely, however, it is impossible to determine in advance if someone will be a domestic abuser or not. Even I, someone you have endless faith in, am no exception.”

“...You hit someone? You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“You can ask him if you’d like,” he said, gesturing at the door with his chin. Right, Saul had mentioned something like that. But, I mean, what else was he supposed to do in that situation? Any normal person would react that way.

The moment that thought crossed my mind, it hit me. Did I not consider myself a “normal” person? Had I been looking down on all the people who had grown up and suffered under the same sorts of circumstances without even realizing it?

No. I didn’t want that. What even was this? Hating people that are too similar to you? I never expected to get such a brutal wakeup call about my own lack of awareness. But that still didn’t mean I felt I was the same as other people.

“The thing is, I know I’m beyond hope. I just haven’t let you see it. I’ve been desperately trying to hide it because I don’t think I could ever recover if I disappointed you.”

“And yet you still threw that stone. You did it for me, prepared to become the greatest villain of the century or whatever it was again.”

“That’s—!”

I made that decision at the very last second, and even I couldn’t really explain it very well myself. The only thought going through my head was that it didn’t matter as long as it would let Richard be happy.

“How dare you go on about how you don’t want to be hated, when you devised that whole plot to make me hate you?”

“...I don’t even know why I do the things I do.”

“I know this may sound rather arrogant, but *I do*. Better than you, even.” Richard said, before kneeling down in front of me in my chair. His blue eyes were looking up at me intently. It reminded me of something Tanimoto had said—that when children are feeling hurt, an adult’s gaze can feel very intimidating, so it’s best to crouch down and lower your eyeline to their level. It makes it easier to talk to them. Was I a child? I certainly must’ve seemed like one to this twenty-nine-year-old jeweler.

“Seigi, I know all too well how much easier it can be to breathe when you curl up in a dark place somewhere, but if you don’t keep it in check, it can become something of a terminal disease. And it is dreadfully boring. Just as the woman you care about so deeply said, gemstones sparkle their brightest in natural light—ideally in the light of the morning sun. And were I to add one more thing from my knowledge as a jeweler, it would be that jewelry looks even more radiant when worn against human skin. That is what it was made for after all. Curiously enough, these are very similar conditions under which people shine even brighter.”

I guess he was saying that people shine brightest when in the sunlight and when touching other people.

It was a pretty extreme argument. I wasn’t all that much of an outdoors

person, so my first reaction was that an indoorsy person might take offense to that suggestion. But when I thought about it in the inverse—a place with no light from the sun and no other people at all, it made me shudder. I didn't want that. This wasn't about being indoors or outdoors—it was about where your heart was.

A warm place with other people.

I bet it would be really nice to be able to live like that.

“...Can I say something horrible?”

“Be my guest. Say whatever you like.”

“...I went out and bought a knife at the hardware store and threatened him, saying I'd stab him if he didn't leave. I think I might have actually done it if he hadn't backed down.”

“It would have been a small price to pay if it had kept you safe. And it's very laudable that you didn't use it. Bravo. But I imagine that must have been quite terrifying for you.”

Bravo? That's not what you say to that. This was serious.

I looked at him, pleadingly, feeling like he hadn't understood anything I'd said, and Richard held a hand out in front of my mouth. Like he was telling me to listen.

“Jeff told me about the conversation you had with him where you explained that you understood how it felt to hate someone so much, you wanted to kill them. He's suffered his fair share as well, so I think he couldn't overlook your pain. But importantly, you did not go astray. Every single day, people struggle and suffer and yet you continue to choose the path of light. You don't choose the easy path, or choose impulsively when you're desperate, you choose to walk in the light. And I think that is very noble. You've done very well.”

Richard smiled when he finished speaking.

The moment I realized that he had been watching over me and accepting me for who I was on a much deeper level than I could have even imagined, I felt like I'd been tossed into the middle of the ocean—it was salty, and I struggled to

breathe. I was such a loser, such a thoughtless person, a timid child crying in the dark with his knees held tightly to his chest, and yet it felt like he took it all in and said that it was fine. But it wasn't just a feeling, he *believed in me*, more than I could ever believe.

I cleared my throat when I realized I was crying again and wiped my eyes with my sleeve. What kind of grown man in college cries multiple times in one night? I couldn't have been a very pleasing sight to behold. Richard promptly handed me some tissues. I blew my nose and started to calm down.

"...What do you think I should do?"

"I think you should start with the past tense of that first—what should you *have done*?"

"What do you think I should have done?"

"You should have gone to someone for help. It didn't need to be me, but you should have talked to someone. You should have told someone that you're in trouble and you don't know what to do. People feel trapped easily when they're alone. It's clear from the fact that you thought you could act your way through it despite how visibly haggard you looked that you had become completely out of touch with yourself. Do you understand how important it is to seek help? Humans are social creatures—not only can they not survive on their own, they also create what we call society. Helping each other is a necessity. Do you understand that?"

"...I'll make sure I do that next time."

"Good."

Richard let out a little "hmph." He seemed to want to scold me further, but he had a vaguely pleased look on his face. It was probably because I was smiling. It's a funny feeling when someone smiles because you smiled. It made me happy.

"Now, why don't you ask your initial question again?"

"Huh? Oh."

He probably meant, "What do you think I should do?"

I repeated the question as instructed, and Richard said something astounding.

“Pick up your phone.”

“Huh?”

“Your cell phone appears to be powered off. Turn it on, please.”

Was he trying to tell me to take a call from *him*? I mumbled something in hesitation, and Richard reassured me not to worry. I wondered what that meant.

“Don’t tell me not to worry! You don’t understand how brazen he is!”

“If you want to talk about brazen, my cousin’s quite the example himself. When he was still a student, he listened to so much rock music and ran around in punk circles that it made his father cry. I still hold on to some photos of him from back then—they’ve proven very useful when I need a favor. But the thing English people are perhaps the most brazen about is never abandoning people once they’ve grown close to them. We may seem difficult at first, but once we make a friend, they’ll be hard-pressed to be rid of us.”

I was pretty sure that was less about English people in general and more Richard’s personal brand of brazenness and compassion, but I guess he was saying he was going to help me. But that just made it worse. What was he going to do if things got messy? My biological father and I were family, so if some issue did arise, I’d probably be able to resolve it a little less formally, but Richard was a total stranger. And a foreigner to boot. The authorities probably wouldn’t be kind to him.

I shook my head, and Richard smiled. He should be praising me for not saying a word.

The person with the most beautiful face in the world was giving me such an attractive look that it made me wonder how it was possible for him to look even more beautiful at point-blank range. It was enough to render words like *handsome* or *beautiful* utterly meaningless. Is it possible to put a name to the spring breeze as it blows by? Some things are just too difficult to put into words.

“You have *nothing* to worry about.”

“Y-your face is so close. Richard, it’s like seriously way too close.”

“You have nothing to worry about, Seigi.”

“Holy crap, I’m being serious. You’re gonna kill me with a beauty overdose.”

“Take a deep breath and behold. I’m sure it will make you want to believe me.”

“...I’m worried about you.”

“As I said, you needn’t be concerned. Think of us as your cheerleaders.”

What was that supposed to mean? Was he saying they were going to support me with the police? Or did they hire a bunch of shady-looking dudes from Kabukicho to beat the crap out of him or something? This wasn’t a joke. I knew Richard wasn’t the kind of person who would do that sort of thing, but I barely knew Jeffrey. Admittedly, I didn’t think he would do anything that would put his older brother or Richard in harm’s way.

“We’re more mature than you think we are. If you’re that opposed to it, we don’t have to do it right now. But you’re going to have to face him sooner or later in one form or another. Like cleaning house to scrub out some stubborn stains.”

“Just keep it legal, please. I’m begging you. Don’t even get close to the line. Stay comfortably inside it.”

“I can assure you that you have nothing whatsoever to be concerned about in that regard.”

“...You’re not lying, are you?”

“I would never lie to you.”

“I feel like those words alone will be enough to sustain me for the rest of my life.”

Richard seemed a little bashful as he replied, “I’m glad,” and pulled away from me. Thankfully. I could finally relax for a moment and then prepare myself. I opened my bag for the first time in a while and pulled out my phone which might as well have been a brick.

Turning it on was easy enough, but the moment I did, I was sure I would get a call. He wasn't the kind of man who would give up after being denied for a while. I hated the idea of letting any part of him into this room.

As I hesitated, Richard called out to me from the window overlooking the city at night.

"Are you afraid?"

His voice was tender. Yes, I was. I hated even thinking about doing this because I was absolutely terrified of him. No humans are born without a father of some sort, and I was terrified that the person who had the privilege of making up half of me would come at me with wobbly emotions that couldn't quite be described as malice or hatred. But I tried to think about it logically. If he tried to hit me, who would win, really? And even if it didn't come to blows, thinking about it objectively, who had the more justified position? Me on both counts, obviously.

Then what did I have to be afraid of?

What did I have to fear other than the fact that I was his son?

I couldn't say anymore. It was just like when you shine a light onto a gemstone so you can clearly see the hazy inclusions and concretely define each and every one—the clearer I saw it, the more the fear began to recede. Just like a ghost wasn't scary anymore once you realized it was just a bunch of withered old flowers.

"When I look at your face, everything else but the thought of how beautiful you are doesn't feel like it matters anymore. I'm not afraid."

"I would like to tell you to try using your brain a little more, but what's the harm? If complimenting me will make you feel better, then go right ahead."

Richard opened the door a bit and invited Jeffrey back inside. He'd bought some food and drink while he was out. He handed me a bottle of water. It quenched my dry throat. It didn't seem like he'd noticed my tearstained cheeks. Thankfully.

I took a deep breath.

I felt a lot better.

My stomach was already full. And if Richard wanted me to settle things, fine. I'd take the call.

I turned my phone back on and spent the next five minutes or so just staring out the window at the night skyline. Then just as predicted, my phone began to vibrate.

"Wah!"

"Seigi, put it on speaker phone."

"I'm recording."

The ship had already left the dock. I clenched my teeth. I switched the phone into speaker mode so I could talk hands-free and pressed the "accept call" button. There was a bit of static, and then I heard the man's voice.

"Seigi, where are you right now? I'm cold and broke, and I can't get into the apartment."

He crammed everything he wanted to say into one succinct line. Nice and easy to understand. I looked over at Richard, wondering what to do next, and he had already picked up a notepad. He was like an assistant director during a live TV broadcast. "Find out where he is right now." Understood.

"...Where are you right now?"

"By the bus terminal at Takadanobaba station. Come on, Seigi, come home. I want to go inside."

Did he really think that he'd get what he wanted if he just kept on whining? Even if I told him that I had no intention of opening my home to him, he didn't have ears capable of hearing that. "I'm cold." "I'll get sick." "I'm sad because my son is being mean to me." "It's hard to be a parent of such an awful child." It grated on my nerves every time I thought to myself, "Let him say whatever the hell he wants." But this wasn't a one-on-one phone call, and Jeffrey kept looking like he was about to burst out laughing at any moment, which made me feel like I didn't need to let him get to me so much. I didn't feel even a twinge of shame on his behalf. I had so thoroughly detached myself from him that I just

felt deeply indifferent.

Richard flashed me another note. "Tell him you're going to Takadanobaba."

Was he serious?

I looked over at him for reassurance repeatedly, and his blue eyes replied, "It'll be fine," and "Trust me."

"...All right, fine, I'll head to Takadanobaba Station right now."

"Where are you?"

"What do you mean where am I? I'm out."

"I'll come meet you. Are you with someone?"

"I'm alone. I went out to eat."

"Why did you go out to eat by yourself? That's not fair. Let's go together next time. What'll it take you, like fifteen minutes to get here? I'll call you again in fifteen minutes. But it's cold, so please hurry. Bye."

And he hung up. I was surprised that he backed off that easily.

I collapsed into a chair, and Jeffrey handed me another bottle of water. He paused the small, cylindrical audio recorder that was sitting next to my phone. The water was delicious. Also, I never realized how much easier just having someone with you could make things feel. I'd been so afraid of feeling like I was causing trouble or that I'd be treated with contempt when my dark secret was exposed, but neither of them showed any hint of, either. I felt so stupid for not asking for advice. Well, I guess I didn't just "feel" stupid—I was stupid. No, I don't need to beat up my past self for that. I was suffering. I could reflect on my actions a little later.

But more immediately was the question of what I was supposed to do. I hadn't even thought about it.

"Don't worry, buddy, I got it aaall on tape. I think we've harvested some nice samples. I think I've talked to a lot of clients in my time, but I don't think I've heard anyone lose it like that since that time a government official from a certain country shouted, 'I'm not giving you anything if you don't cough up a bribe!' Maybe he should be a comedian."

“Jeff.”

“Sorry. All right, I’ll hold down the fort here, so you head out with Richard.”

I guess we were going to Takadanobaba? Were we really going? We weren’t just going to waste fifteen minutes and wait for him to call back so we can record more of his abuse to take to the police?

I checked with Richard, and he mumbled that it was another viable option. But Jeffrey said he had enough audio. I guess his technically legal stalking activities were paying off. I imagined he probably used basically the same techniques that private detectives and stuff use.

“There’s a slightly faster way to get it done. Don’t worry. My little brother may look impossibly beautiful and frail as a twig, but I think you’d be impressed if you saw him with his shirt off. He’s got plenty of muscle on him, so you don’t need to worry if things get a little dicey. If anyone tries to hurt you—”

“Jeff.”

“I apologize. Sorry. I went a little overboard.”

“I still haven’t forgiven you for not telling me about Chieko.”

“Sorry. But thank you.”

Richard and Jeffrey were talking. I was too busy to notice earlier, but they’d made some serious progress, hadn’t they? I didn’t know the ins and outs of everything Jeffrey had done, but I had been hoping they’d reconcile, so it was a relief to see them starting to rebuild their relationship. Richard took a phone call while Jeffrey chatted cheerfully with me about how Richard had been giving him the cold shoulder lately and all the new vocabulary he’d picked up. I wondered what language Richard was speaking. It sounded like some kind of Asian language, but not Chinese or Korean, not Hindi or Sinhala. I felt like I was starting to develop an ear for this sort of thing. Maybe it was Tagalog?

Richard finished his phone call while I was making small talk with Jeffrey and told me we were leaving. I followed Richard. Jeffrey waved to us as we left. The green Jaguar was already waiting for us. We headed for my usual station via a slightly different route than usual. But I wasn’t afraid, because Richard was right there next to me.

“Regarding what happened earlier.”

“Huh? You mean about the plan?”

“No,” Richard replied. He never took his eyes off the road. “I still can’t believe you responded to that with ‘what floor?’”

He was talking about what happened at the bar? That felt like an incredibly unfair thing to say. That was totally a trick question, wasn’t it? Well, tricking people is wrong. I responded, asking him what he would have done if I’d turned him down, and Richard went quiet for a moment before mumbling his response with a strained look on his face.

“If you’d responded like that, I probably would have told you about 80 percent of the truth. ‘Okay, Jeffrey is waiting upstairs, planning a surprise party for you, so could you play along and pretend you were none the wiser?’ or something to that effect.”

As I was in the middle of retorting that he was clearly being very generous with that remaining 20 percent where all the critical information happened to be, Richard interrupted me.

“I actually thought *that* was how you would respond.”

Richard’s voice sounded strained, like he really didn’t think I would ever say something like that. I felt like that was what I should have been saying, but I held my tongue.

“Hearing you say that filled me with dread and made me a little angry, too. Being unable to turn down an invitation you absolutely should refuse puts you at a distinct disadvantage. You should take that to heart.”

“Okay, I’ll be more careful in the future.”

“But just so you know, if anyone but you had said that to me, I woulda run.”

It’d be like if Tanimoto asked me if she could hit me. What else could I say but, “sure”? I dunno why she would ever want to hit me, but she’d obviously have a reason. It’s the luxury of having people you can trust—you can clearly see beyond their literal words.

Richard looked like he still wasn’t happy with my answers, but judging from

his face, he didn't seem like he was angry anymore. After taking a moment to be indignant about it, he muttered:

"...Well, good then."

"You really are getting sloppy, huh?"

"How dare you. I would never do anything to harm you. But I guess it was a fool's errand to tell a black belt to protect himself. Forget I said anything."

"Look, I get it. I trust you."

He didn't respond. Richard just kept his eyes straight ahead on the road. But I could see his face in profile. He looked very pleased with himself. The orange of the streetlights flashed through the window at regular intervals. For just a brief moment, I felt a strange feeling of serenity, like I was standing in a holy place. It was like I wasn't a mere mortal and thus had nothing to fear.

My heart rate shot up the closer I got to the bus terminal. It felt like there was a lump of air caught in my throat, and no matter how many breaths I took, I couldn't get any air. Before I could ask for a time out, Richard stopped the car and asked if I wanted to call it quits for today. Could I really stop now? I replied, asking if it wouldn't mess up the plan, and he said that it wasn't anything that crazy. What on earth did he have in mind? Had he found his loan contracts and the loan sharks he'd taken them out with or something? Richard seemed utterly unconcerned. The air about each of us was so different, it made me nervous.

There he was, right in front of the station that was normally full of people, standing next to the taxi stand. I could tell it was him from a distance from his height. He kept looking at the turnstiles, not expecting me to be coming in a green foreign-made car.

"All right, I'll get out here."

"No. You will stay put. I am getting out."

"Huh? What?!"

No, you can't. You have nothing to do with this.

The man was startled when he turned around at the sound of car doors

unlocking and was met with this overwhelmingly beautiful man, but when he noticed that his son was freaking out in the passenger seat, he smiled happily at Richard. He looked like a carp flapping its mouth open when it found some food. I still wanted to beg him to stop, to not talk to someone like *him*.

“Good evening. Are you a friend of my son Seigi?”

“So it appears.”

“You’re a foreigner! And you can speak Japanese, huh? Thanks for looking after my boy. I’m his dad, Hisashi. Wow, I’m really surprised. Right, he said he had a part-time job or something. Are you a host or something? Seigi’s my pride and joy, you see. Seigi, why aren’t you getting out of the car? Oh, can I get in?”

As I listened to him talk through the glass, the one thought going through my head was that I’d knock him on his ass if he touched the car. I could only see half of Richard’s face, but he seemed kind of out of it. Like he was playing dumb. He had this look on his face like he didn’t understand a word he’d said.

“...Um, do you understand me?”

“Oh, I do understand that you’re a person who makes some rather strange claims.”

“Huh? What?”

“There is only one man I know to be his father.”

And at that moment, someone came up from behind him and squeezed his shoulder, making him turn around.

“Hello. I’m Yasuhiro Nakata.”

“It has been far too long, Mr. Nakata.”

“Thank you for getting in contact with me, Richard.”

The car was full of nothing but the sound of me going, “What?!” repeatedly.

Yasuhiro Nakata—my stepdad.

What? He had sun-kissed skin and similarly sun-kissed brown hair and the muscular body of a seaman—and he should have been in Indonesia right now. Why was he here, in Takadanobaba? And why was he in contact with Richard?

Did they know each other? What?

I fumbled my way through opening the door and got out of the car to head over to the entrance, where my biological father was visibly uncomfortable as the muscular man intimidated him. Mr. Nakata was angry. Very angry. He was wearing a T-shirt and chinos, which, come to think of it, was the same thing he had on when we celebrated Christmas two years ago in the Machida apartment. I thought it was a little weird that he was wearing a T-shirt in the middle of winter, but he went right back to work after that, so I never had a chance to ask him about it.

“Huh? Who is this man? Whatever you’re doing, please stop it.”

“I’m Hiromi’s husband. I heard someone was harassing our son. So it was you, Mr. Shimeno. I would appreciate it if you stopped trying to harm my beloved child.”

“P-please don’t make such strange accusations. Seigi and I are bound by blood.”

“Then do you know how he placed in his sixth-grade field day relay?”

I had no idea what Mr. Nakata was talking about. Shimeno didn’t seem to, either. The former continued to press him.

“Do you know the name of the student he had a crush on in junior high school?”

“Do you know what subject he was best at in high school?”

“Do you know what day he got his driver’s license?”

“Do you know what school he’s going to right now? What he’s studying? And what he hopes to do in the future?”

“Do you know his birthday? What his favorite foods are? His favorite sport?”

“Because I know the answers to all of those questions.”

Shimeno was flabbergasted. I was, too. The only people in this group of four who *weren’t* flabbergasted were Richard and Mr. Nakata. This blue-collar working man who still looked like he was in his thirties, despite being forty-eight, made Shimeno wither visibly. But of course he did—he was a whole head

taller than him, too.

“We may not be connected by blood, but he is my son, and I love him. I may not have been there to care for him from the moment he was born, but I intend to look after him from now on to make up for it. Anyone who bothers him, no matter their relationship, is my enemy. I’m asking you to back off.”

“Y-you know there’s a police box right in front of the station. They might get the wrong idea.”

“A police box, huh? All right, let’s all go together. Richard, could you repeat everything you told me over the phone to the police officers?”

“Happily. I have a recording of a phone conversation that I’d be more than happy to play as well.”

Shimeno silently pulled away from Mr. Nakata’s hands and took off running in the opposite direction of the police box. He ran at full speed into the tunnel and kept going until I couldn’t see him anymore. He ran. I wonder what would happen if he came back. He might come back again. But I didn’t care anymore.

I wonder why?

Richard walked over to me with Mr. Nakata. Neither of them seemed particularly shaken. It was just me.

“Mr. Nakata, how are you here?”

“Seigi, has it really been two years already? Look how much you’ve grown! I’m sorry I haven’t been here, and that I wasn’t here to help you. I wanted to come home much sooner. I feel awful.”

Mr. Nakata suddenly looked like he was about to cry. *Oh, please, no. Please don’t do that. This was all my fault. If I had a better head on my shoulders, this wouldn’t have become as big of a mess as it had in the first place.*

Still, it made me incredibly happy that he was worried about me. And it made me even happier that he’d come to save me. I was scared to ask him why, but I was happy.

I wasn’t in the mood to cry for a third time in a single day. Rattled as I was, I managed to keep my tear ducts in check as the two of them approached me.

Mr. Nakata gave me a big hug. He squeezed me so tight, my arms hurt. The way he showed affection was so easy to understand. I remembered him sitting me on his big lap when he explained to me that the world was a big place and that there were all sorts of resources in the sea, too, not just on land. I was already in fifth grade at the time, and a little embarrassed to be held that way, but I didn't say anything, because I knew this new member of my family was desperately trying to befriend me. I was a little afraid of him at first, but once I realized he'd never hit Hiromi or me, I'd never felt uncomfortable around him. He wasn't home very often, just like Hiromi, but whenever he was there, it made the place feel almost like a warm bath—I think it was the sense of security he brought with him.

Mr. Nakata finally released me from the embrace. I noticed that his cropped hair had a little more grey in it than before, but it made him look cool, like a master artisan.

“Richard and Hiromi got in contact with me, so I made a temporary trip home. This is what PTO is for, after all.”

“Huh? Wait. Richard *and* Hiromi?”

I felt like all the new information I was being bombarded with had slapped me in the face. What was even going on? As I froze in confusion, Mr. Nakata looked at Richard, surprised.

“Richard, did you not tell him?”

“I thought I'd explain it now, once we were here. It seemed like it would make this situation more complicated if I hadn't kept quiet. Seigi, I should have told you this earlier, but when I returned to Japan at the end of last year, I met your parents before I saw you. I desperately wanted to apologize for everything that happened in England.”

I couldn't breathe.

Just give me a second. My brain couldn't keep up. So, Mr. Nakata and Richard already knew each other, and both he and Hiromi have known about what happened in England since *the end of last year*? I remembered suddenly that Mr. Nakata communicated with the people he worked with on-site in Tagalog. Which meant the person Richard had been on the phone with was—ah. Ah.

I felt like the world was spinning around me.

“H-how did you know how to contact my family?”

“You gave me their information as your emergency contacts when I hired you.”

I thought that was just for emergencies. Then again, I guess that *had* been a pretty big emergency.

Mr. Nakata looked at me with a slightly frustrated expression. He must’ve been mad. I was sure I’d caused him a lot of trouble. He’d said he had PTO saved up, but he must’ve wasted a whole day just to get back to Japan. Was that really okay? And even beyond that...he’d known about the England thing for a while, too?

“Mr. Nakata, I...”

“Seigi, there’s just one thing I want you to explain to me.”

His voice was very serious. I stiffened up. I’d never once seen him mad. No, wait, I had seen it, *once*...when I’d leaned out the window of our apartment, letting my feet dangle in the air. Why did he get mad at me back then, anyway?

Mr. Nakata looked me intently in the eye. He looked deadly serious.

“Seigi, you may not realize this, but it made me very happy when you became my son. So I wish you wouldn’t say things about not being my kid anymore. I know I haven’t been around much, but I’m going to try to be a better father to you from now on. I want to be there for you when you’re in trouble, and I’d like to be there to help you even when you’re not in trouble, too. You’ve got such a good head on your shoulders, I might not have another opportunity to come to your rescue, but I hope you’ll look to me for help, even if you don’t need saving. You really scared me.”

Agh, no, Richard really told him *everything* didn’t he? Even what I’d said about how since we weren’t blood related, if I ever got slapped with some massive debt, I could just cut ties with him and he’d be fine. Even how I said I knew Hiromi would never forgive me if I did that. But why?

Why was he looking at me with tears in his eyes, even knowing I’d said

something so awful?

“Hiromi was less angry and more shocked. But she did say she understood why you didn’t try to talk to her. I wish you would stop doing that. Both of you are so hard on yourselves. I wish you’d be a little kinder.”

“I-I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I just—”

“You don’t need to apologize. And you know, that may have made me really sad, but I am so proud of you. From the bottom of my heart. No one else could have done what you did. You really are an amazing man.”

Wah. Please, have mercy! I was so weak in the face of tender father-son moments. Now that I was actually thinking about it, I guess on some level, I’d always thought such moments only existed in the realm of fantasy...but at the same time, some part of me had hoped they were real. And now it was actually happening—to me. What even was this? Was I dreaming with my eyes open? I couldn’t take it anymore.

The moment I thought that, I was interrupted by a clap on my shoulder. It was Richard.

“It’s still a bit early for tears.”

What was with that face he was making? He was the very picture of serenity. It was the look he had when he was serving customers at *Étranger*. Mr. Nakata echoed the sentiment with a “Yeah.”

“That’s right. We haven’t even gotten to today’s main event. Richard, I can’t thank you enough.”

“I’m just happy it arrived in time. She can be very capricious.”

“But are you sure about the design?”

I had no idea what they were talking about. Richard opened the trunk of the Jaguar and pulled out a black paper shopping bag. It had a white satin ribbon on it. It was beautiful.

Mr. Nakata wiped away his tears with the back of his hand, took the bag from Richard, and offered it to me.

“Here, Seigi. This is for you.”

“...Huh?”

“Open it. Open it!”

Mr. Nakata’s face lit up like a child’s. When I undid the ribbon and looked inside, I found a white paper box. Richard took the bag for me, and when I opened the box, I found a velvet box inside it. It had a familiar texture. It snapped open like a clam.

What was it exactly sitting on top of the cushion, I wondered.

Two sparkling things. Earrings? No. They were cuff links.

Each one had a sparkling blue stone set in a silver metal. The stones were about the size of acorns and were faceted into a round shape. They sparkled in the neon lights of Takadanobaba. It was probably, no, definitely tanzanite.

“Happy birthday, Seigi. If only I could’ve made it to your coming of age!”

“They’re Maya’s latest work. She was unusually motivated when it came to this project, so she sent a number of nearly final designs—we were quite spoiled for choice. Do you like them?”

Richard addressed me like a customer. He was smiling so much, I almost couldn’t stand it.

I could just hear her voice echoing in my head, calling me “darling.” I was drowning in a sea of information when I was already saturated. What? So, Mr. Nakata ordered these from Ms. Darling? And they’re for me? When I’d run into Ms. Darling at Shinagawa Station, she’d told me I had “handsome hands.” And that she figured out the specifics of a design by talking to her clients.

I couldn’t get any sound to come out of my mouth other than weird groans.

These were for me? Something this beautiful?

“Wh...why?”

“It’s your birthday, isn’t it? May 14th.”

“...Oh.”

That’s right. It was my birthday. What did I even do for it last year? I tried to remember, but I couldn’t. Surely I did something. But I couldn’t think about

anything other than what had just happened here. Mr. Nakata seemed to be smiling as much as I was confused, but there was a hint of sadness in his cheery face.

“I wasn’t here to celebrate your coming of age with you. We had an accident on the site last year and were short-staffed, so I couldn’t come home...so I wanted to have a big celebration for you this year to make up for it. I hope you’ll accept them.”

“...Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure! Happy birthday, Seigi. I’m so happy you were born. I hope you’ll be my son forever.”

There was something I always felt when I was with him. It was a sense of admiration, that he was the kind of adult I wanted to grow up to be—strong and kind, someone who never acts like he’s better than other people and uses his skills to help those in need. Every time I thought about how I wanted to grow up like him, it actually made me sad because I’d remember he’s not my *real* father. Every time I felt myself looking up to him as my dad, I remembered that I’m actually *his* son, and that frustrated me deeply.

But if he wants me to be his son forever.

Then sure, why not? Why not think of myself as his son? Why not think of him as my *real* father?

“...Um...do you mind if I start calling you Dad again?”

“Of course I don’t mind! That would make me incredibly happy!”

“Thanks, Dad!”

“You really don’t have to thank me for that. You really are a good kid. I’m the one who should be thanking you.”

Oh no. We were both such crybabies. I remember going to the movies with him in the afternoon once. The film had been about someone with superpowers ending up on death row on false charges, and both of us were bawling by the end. Hiromi was so disturbed when she got home.

I thought I heard Richard make a comment about “Like father, like son,” but I

couldn't be sure. But I'd never wanted something to be true more badly in my life.

"All right, Richard, I know I've caused you enough trouble already, but thank you in advance for the help tomorrow. I think I should be able to catch up with you in the afternoon."

"Don't you worry about the move. I'll take care of everything."

Richard gave Mr. Nakata a crisp bow. What about tomorrow and moving? I guess there was more they hadn't told me. I pleaded with Richard to just tell me everything already, and he looked at me like it was nothing and said:

"You'll be staying at that hotel for a while, not those extended stay accommodations you booked."

"...Huh? Wait, by 'that hotel,' do you mean the one we were just at?"

The one in Tameike-sanno? In that world-class luxury room?

"You've been through a lot lately. Think of it as a reward for getting through it all, or as a nice change of place. Jeff's footing the bill."

"Wh-what? Why? I'm a total stranger."

"Oh, please. He noticed you were in danger even before I did, and you should've seen the look on his face when he said that Henry would never forgive him if something happened to you. Take advantage of it. He's the kind of man who likes to let his wallet do the talking."

"You really are hard on your big brother."

"He is *not* my big brother. I would never address him as such."

All jokes aside, I couldn't possibly accept. I could have all the money in the world and it wouldn't be enough to afford that favor, and I had everything I needed in my Takadanobaba apartment...even though it currently looked like a bomb had gone off in it. I told him all that.

"Your things should be in the process of being delivered to the room Jeff is in right now. I received permission from your cosigner, Hiromi Nakata, and approval from your landlord. Even she was deeply concerned about you, and she asked me to tell you to try not to worry and to take your time."

He had answers for everything. In other words, I could just go back to that hotel like this? To that dreamlike massive room *for free*?

“...Could you pinch me?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because I can’t tell if I’m dreaming. Maybe I died and didn’t realize it.”

“Unfortunately, this is very much reality, and you are not dead. And I’m sure you understand that this crisis hasn’t been fully resolved yet, either. You should take some time off school for a bit as well. Mr. Nakata has offered to explain the situation to the school, and I will be here to support you to the best of my abilities. I know we’re a step behind, but we need to do everything we can from here on.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Richard told me that he wants to be able to help you too when he told me about the situation.”

And then Mr. Nakata explained that Hiromi was a little shaken, but it wasn’t anything serious. Oh. He wasn’t just protecting me but Hiromi, too. He was like a big tree. I probably couldn’t even compare to the weight of his presence in Hiromi’s eyes.

“...Do you think Hiromi’s going to be okay?”

“Yeah. Hiromi was the first one to call me, actually. I flew back right after that, but she was already doing a lot better by the time I got home. Richard’s been a great help, but his older brother’s, how to put it...a real pro. Is he a counselor or something?”

“No, he’s just a good-for-nothing bachelor who does whatever he pleases.”

There is such a thing as being too harsh, but I was pretty sure this was Richard’s way of showing his affection. It was kinda cute. When I started smiling, Richard turned away and started scanning the area like he just remembered we still needed to be on guard. Right. Our uninvited guest could come back while we were distracted. I shivered, and Mr. Nakata squeezed my hand. His hand was big and rough.

“Are you okay?”

“...I’m fine. I’m pretty strong, you know?”

“I don’t think being strong or not has anything to do with whether you’re okay.”

“I’ve been okay for a bit now,” I said, giving Mr. Nakata a look to say, “All thanks to you.” My beloved dad smiled joyfully, understanding what I wanted to say.

“Good. That’s a relief. I have Hiromi to get back to, so I’ll be returning to Machida tonight, but you promise to call. And call me when you get to the hotel, too. Not a text—a call. Please.”

“I got it. Take good care of Hiromi.”

“Just leave it to me. Oh, but I guess Hiromi asked me to make sure you were taken care of,” Mr. Nakata said and, for some reason, looked at Richard and bowed again deeply.

“Please look after my son.”

“I’ll do the job for you to the best of my abilities. I’ll let you know when we arrive as well.”

“...Hey, Seigi, Richard’s definitely better at Japanese than me, isn’t he? And he’s better at Tagalog, too! You really know an incredible person!”

“I think so, too...”

Mr. Nakata ruffled my hair and gave me one more big hug before disappearing through the JR ticket gate.

“Let’s head out. Get in.”

“Yeah, will do.”

I got into the passenger seat of the Jaguar, and Richard started driving. I felt my body being pulled into the seat as the car retraced its path.

“...You really got me!”

“There is no need to shout.”

“You scared me! Seriously! Wah...man, what did you do? You even met Hiromi? And you kept it from me, too...”

It was so shocking, it was actually funny. I was pretty sure shock was right at the intersection of laughing and crying. Laughing or crying were pretty much the same.

“So, what do you plan to do about Étranger?”

“Huh?”

“You said you wanted to quit immediately.”

Richard the jeweler blinked his eyes so snappily, you’d almost think they made a sound. He was beautiful. His face was so beautiful, it didn’t seem natural. I bowed my head as low as my seat belt would allow.

“Please let me keep working for you. I’ll do anything.”

“What is this ‘I’ll do anything’? You shouldn’t say such things with such ease. And I am not accepting ‘It’s okay because it’s me,’ as an excuse this time.”

“...Sorry.”

“I don’t want an apology, I want you to reflect on your behavior. I imagine you understand this by now, but your number-one assignment at the moment is learning to value yourself more.”

Because if you cannot treat yourself with kindness, you will never be able to treat others with kindness.

The words Richard had said to me back at the hotel were still swimming around in my chest. They felt like the words I needed to take a step forward. I was already capable of throwing myself away to help someone else, but that wouldn’t make anyone happy because I wasn’t thinking about what came next. I felt like he was telling me that I needed to not give up and use my head to think of a way to save *both of us* in that situation and make things work out. And that’s what I wanted to do, too.

I mean, Mr. Nakata said I was his son and that he loved me very much, after all. I didn’t want to be responsible for losing something he loved.

“...I guess I still have a lot of growing to do, huh? Do you think it’ll really be okay, though? I mean, the job hunt’s only going to get tougher from here on.”

“It’ll work out one way or another. I promise you that. We’ll manage.”

I'm pretty sure with all these people offering to help me, if I can't figure it out somehow, I'll be struck down by the heavens.

My biggest problems at the moment were moving and school, but there wasn't much I could do about either now. I guess I would just have to lean on Richard and Jeffrey a little. That said, I was still reeling from all the unbelievable shocks I got today. It was really only just hitting me that I had been embroiled in something pretty serious, if I do say so myself. It made me shiver again.

Because if I had kept living like that, even if I didn't slip up once, I'd eventually let him into my apartment. And then I'd close the door behind him and open the cabinet beneath the kitchen sink, where I kept my three most beloved tools—one for cutting meat, one for cutting vegetables, and one for cutting fruit.

"Seigi."

"Hm?"

"What were you thinking about just now?"

"...About how to fillet a fish—"

"I don't quite follow, but would you like to see if Jeffrey can get you a room with a kitchen?"

"No! It's fine! That hotel probably doesn't have anything like that anyway!"

I was pretty sure I wasn't going to be in the mood to hold any kind of knife for a while. I was still scared of myself. Pudding was just perfect for that situation. All you needed for that were liquids and powders—a food that was the very picture of peace.

"Why don't we stop somewhere on our way back? There is a non-trivial chance that you'll be stuck in that hotel for quite some time. How about a big bookstore? You might have an opportunity to do some leisure reading."

"Like I have that kind of free time! I'm gonna be devoting all my energy to job hunting. Unless you mean..."

Unless he meant that it might take a fair bit of time for this situation to be fully resolved. I mean, there was another person at the heart of this whole thing. I couldn't know when he'd come after me again. And even if I left the

hotel pretty quickly, I'd probably have to keep running for a while.

I felt a knot forming in my stomach as I started to imagine a clearer picture of what awaited me in the future, when Richard snorted as if to say, "Just who do you think I am?" I guess he was trying to tell me not to worry. I appreciated that.

"I don't know what will happen in the future. It may take a long time to resolve, or it may be over very quickly. But at any rate, there isn't much we can do until we can ensure your safety. Jeffrey is hard at work, too. Until we can find you accommodations with a secure lobby that's staffed 24/7, you'll have to put up with temporary lodgings."

"So I'm going to be at the hotel until then? Are you sure I shouldn't be somewhere cheaper?"

"You can be so tedious sometimes. You need to realize that you're in a position where you have more important things to worry about than money. Safety is something money can buy to a degree. Despite how that good-for-nothing may look, he is quite capable. You should feel as though you can rest easy."

Thanks, Jeffrey. But I doubt I'd ever be able to pay him back if things took a turn and he came to me looking to get repaid far off in the future, so I'd have to negotiate with him personally later.

"On a different note, I hear that you've been setting aside most of your wages from *Étranger*."

"...Oh yeah. So I'll be okay even if my rent goes up, and I'll be able to cover moving costs."

"I thought you were going to use that money to pay your mother back for your tuition?"

Richard's comment had nothing to do with my answer, but of course it didn't. Richard was trying to gently tell me something.

"Well, she told me to tell you, 'That's not why I'm putting you through college. Work hard to save up so you can use that money when you need to without having to worry. I don't need you to pay me back.'"

Hiromi.

I nearly sent her a message that would make her think her son had died. I was glad I hadn't, and I think Richard had left that out, too. Thinking back on it now, that would have hurt her really badly. But she didn't have to be this nice to me. I knew we weren't the type of people who could say we loved each other. We shared an unspoken understanding that we do better alone than being all touchy-feely with each other when we're together, because it reminds us of our past. But despite that, I didn't think we had a bad relationship.

I wonder if I'll ever be able to do something to repay her kindness. If I'm not going to pay back my tuition, it'll have to be something bigger.

But paying my tuition back was a point of stubborn pride for me, so I was determined to do it sooner or later, whatever she said. These recent expenses would set things back a bit, so I decided to consider it permission to take some more time. That made me feel better at least.

"...Let's say I half accept the message. I feel like we've kinda turned you into a message carrier. It must be a pain. I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize. You went through much worse with my family."

After that, Richard told me I didn't need to rush to sort out my feelings about everything that had happened today and encouraged me to take my time to think it all through. Headlights streamed past on the night road. It was so calm and quiet inside the Jaguar. There were orange lights, white lights, and neon blue off in the distance.

Neon blue...

"Why tanzanite?"

Maybe Mr. Nakata just liked tanzanite. No, it would be *really* out of the blue if he had an interest in that sort of thing at all. He'd probably just made the order partly as a token of goodwill because of Richard's occupation and my part-time job, but why tanzanite?

There was probably an 80 to 90 percent chance that Richard had recommended it.

But why that stone in particular?

The beautiful jeweler paused for a moment before softly opening his mouth, like a mermaid blowing bubbles on the seafloor.

“Do you know tanzanite’s hardness and cleavage characteristics?”

“You mean how hard it is to scratch and how easy it is to break?”

“Precisely,” Richard responded.

How was I supposed to know? I told him I didn’t. I looked it up on my smartphone, and it said it’s between a 6 and a 7 on the Mohs scale and it has perfect cleavage. “It’s relatively soft for a gemstone and breaks easily.” I was surprised to see that. Wouldn’t it not be suited to cuff links, then?

Richard smiled when he saw the shocked look on my face.

“It’s certainly not something I would recommend to just anyone. But thinking about it from another angle, I thought those cuff links might serve as a handy reminder against your rather reckless behavior.”

Well, he did have a point there.

Thankfully, my karate training had paid off, and thankfully, no one had ever told me my form was awkward. But I had been told that I was too quick to act before. Many times. I didn’t have a lot of regrets from the decisions I’d made, but I often felt like if I’d thought about it a little more, things might have gone *better*.

So maybe in moments like that, I should think about my cuff links—it might make me think about what to do a little more if I had such delicate company to consider.

“I suppose outside of very formal occasions, there aren’t many opportunities for a Japanese person to wear cuff links. But despite that, Mr. Nakata wanted to give you those cuff links as you begin your journey out into the wider world. He was very pleased by their blue color, reminding him of the deep ocean.”

“Ahh...that makes me so happy.”

“But really, do take care with them, you hear me? If you handle them roughly, Étranger’s most terrifying designer will strike you down like a bolt from the

blue.”

“Is Ms. Maya really that scary?”

“That she is. Her anger is rather unique. Not only will you have no idea how long she’s been angry at you for, but she won’t leave you even a shred of an escape route. You’ll get to savor the very unique stress of feeling as though a massive serpent has suddenly caught you in its coils.”

“You really must’ve set her off before, huh...”

“Ahem,” Richard cleared his throat before addressing me again. “Seigi, do you remember what tanzanite is said to represent?”

“Rebirth, right?”

“Bravo. Think of them as a magical item that will help you be reborn into a new Seigi Nakata. Take good care of them.”

Tears started welling up in my eyes again. Did I really need to cry more tonight? I gritted my back teeth and let out a sigh. I knew there was no use hiding it from Richard and that there was a box of tissues in the glove compartment, but this was another point of stubborn pride for me.

“...I’m so glad I was given the name Seigi Nakata.”

“I’m quite fond of your name myself.”

“Thank you. You know, I like everything about you.”

Richard was at a loss for words. One more push.

“I still remember that conversation we had about how, someday in the future, we’ll meet for one last time. But I don’t want it to just be one last time. I want to be by your side from now on, if you’ll let me.”

I felt embarrassed the second I opened my mouth. I said it. I can’t believe I said it. I was pretty sure this was the most self-indulgent thing I could have possibly asked for at the moment.

I thought back to when he told me to carry myself with pride. He told me that I had many talents, but I’d have to uncover them myself. I was working on that, but all I could come up with was that I’m physically strong, I know karate, and

that I never hesitate to show kindness to the elderly. And sometimes that'd make me spiral into a pit of self-hatred.

So I figured maybe I'd have an easier time figuring out more about myself if I was around someone who's good at solving mysteries.

I could do errands, and clean, and do chores, and cook, and I was slowly learning to speak English. And if there was anything else that would be good for me to be able to do, I would try to learn it.

So I wondered if he'd let me see him from time to time, just for my own interests, even if I wasn't working part-time for him anymore or even if I didn't have a particular reason to.

When I finished explaining all that to Richard, he looked almost disappointed. I wondered why.

"I understand what you're trying to say."

"Thank you."

"...However, your initial statement was inappropriate. It sounded like you were proposing to me."

"Sorry."

I tried to think of another way to put it on the spot. "Would you let me see you if I make time?" Now that just sounded like I was asking him out on a date. "Could we get together from time to time because I'm trying to become a person worthy of you." I think I just made it worse. "For all the care you've shown to me, would you let me—" No, that was probably bad, too. How *should* I put it?

I looked at his beautiful face pleadingly, and Richard glanced at me, just briefly pulling his eyes from the road.

"...Sure."

"Huh?"

"I told you that I understood what you were trying to say, didn't I? So let's do it."

The city lights hitting his pale skin from the opposite side of the car looked almost like a gaudy backlight highlighting his silhouette, and every strand of his blond hair looked like gold. I felt like I'd seen a picture like this in a fine arts textbook—a portrait of a mysterious beauty appearing from a dark haze.

The person in the picture never looked at me, but Richard did when the car came to a stop.

"At times, I also find it easier to breathe when you're with me."

And then he smiled.

So many things had kept happening today—well, not just today, for a while now—that I was well beyond my capacity, but that smile of his was special. *Beautiful* felt too commonplace a word for it. But what was it exactly? Was it meant to be a reward for all my hard work?

Richard looked happy.

His smile looked a bit more innocent than usual.

It had appeared for only a brief moment, but it was long enough to leave an indelible mark on my memory.

"All right, we can leave the bookstore for next time, so why don't we buy you a cake? I heard there's a shop around here that's open late. Open your eyes wide and scan the right side of the road for me. I'll take the left."

"Aren't you still stuffed from earlier?!"

"I'm offering you a late-night snack. My portion is merely incidental."

"Gee, thanks. You know, you probably should get your blood tested."

"I don't need you to tell me that. Now, I'm counting on you from here on."

"...Leave it to me."

The light changed, and the green Jaguar would continue driving through the city at night as if nothing at all had happened. But before that, Richard offered me his hand. It was just a brief moment, but our palms touched as we exchanged a handshake.



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